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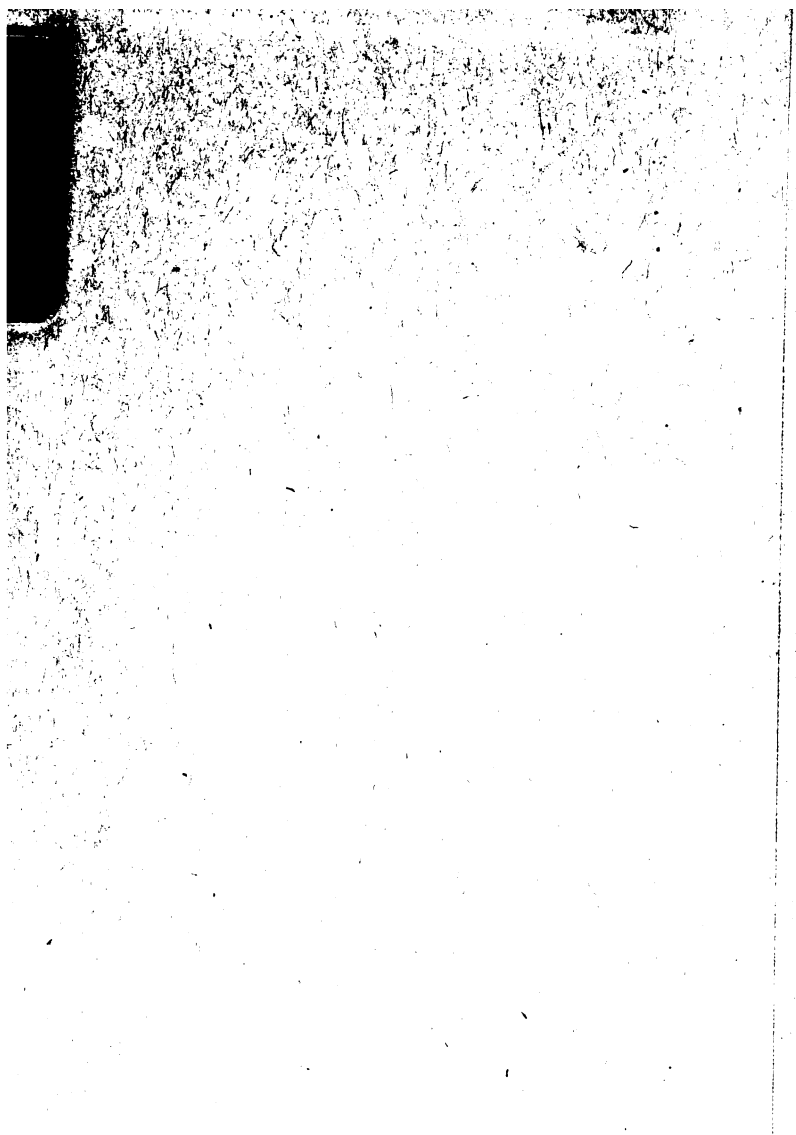
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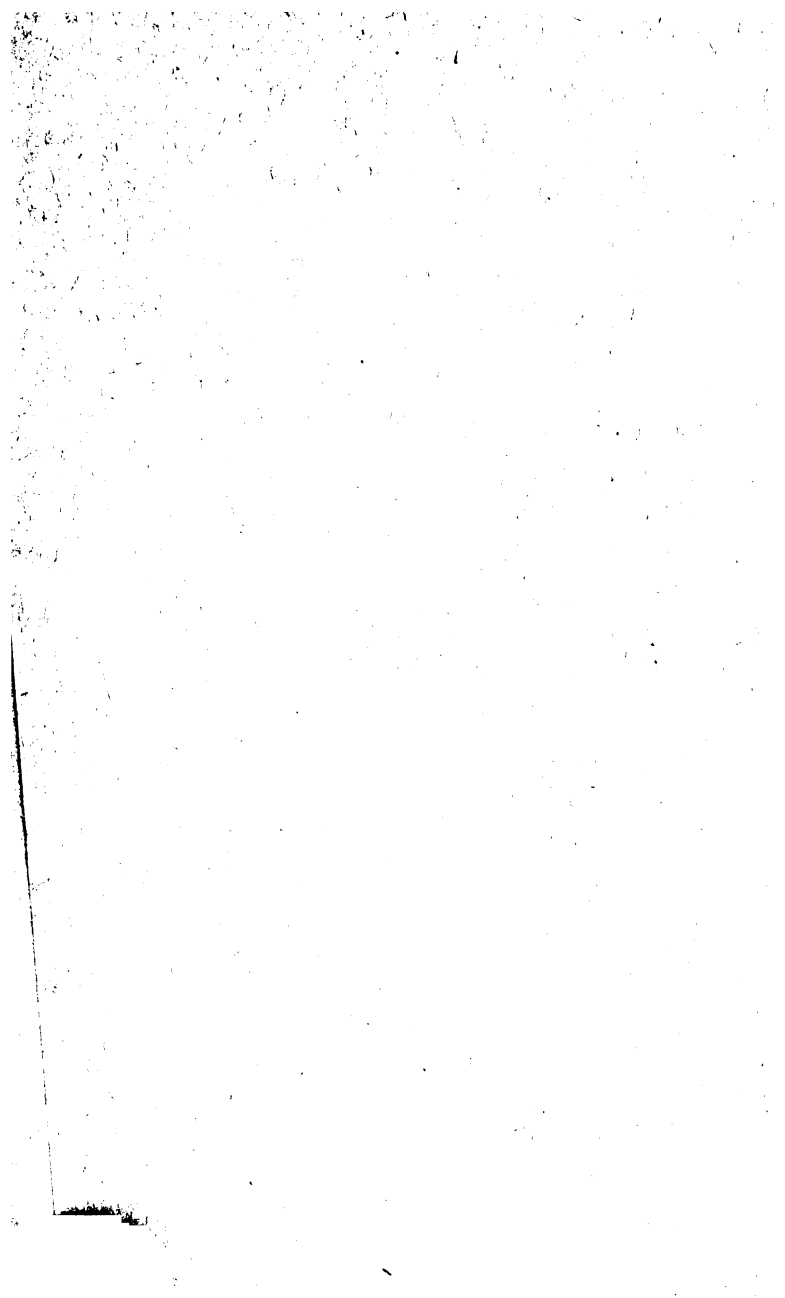
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## **THE STRANGE ATTRACTION**



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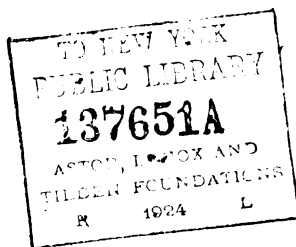
# THE STRANGE ATTRACTION

By  
**JANE MANDER**  
AUTHOR OF "THE PASSIONATE PURITAN," AND  
"THE STORY OF A NEW ZEALAND RIVER"



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*Certain American Friends*  
*Whose Encouragement and Practical Help*  
*Made Possible*  
*The Writing of This Story*

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**"It is the business of the very few to be independent ;  
it is a privilege of the strong."**

**"Flee, my friend, into thy solitude. I see thee deaf-  
ened with the noise of the great men, and stung all over  
with the stings of the little ones."**

**"Admirably do forest and rock know how to be silent  
with thee."—NIETZSCHE**



# THE STRANGE ATTRACTION

## CHAPTER I

### I

"I DO hope you will like it," said Bob Lorrimer rather doubtfully.

"I don't care a cuss if I don't. I shall stay till I've got all I can out of it. But I say, this is hot, isn't it?" answered Valerie Carr.

"Yes, it's the worst since I came. You couldn't see much of the river, I suppose. There's a big fire to the north of us."

"Not a thing," she said in a disgusted tone.

They stood on what was known as the Dargaville main wharf beside the steamer that had just brought Valerie from Helensville. Passengers still moved cautiously down the unrailed gangway with packages and bags in their hands, and relatives still greeted each other with forced gaiety or honest affection, and acquaintances with laconic nods. The donkey engine swung the first net full of trunks and boxes in dangerous imminence above the heads of all who stood on the limited area of the narrow landing.

"Look out! Look out!" impatiently yelled one of the steamer hands, annoyed that it should be his job to save people who did not seem to want to live.

There was a scramble out of the way. Bob and Valerie drew aside against the wall of a zinc shed. She looked into the pile of luggage that was dumped at her feet, saw that



her own belongings were not there, and turned again to Bob.

"What do you think of it so far?" she asked.

"I think the paper is a promising thing. They will turn it into a daily next summer if we make a good start. Anyway it is a stepping-stone, and we can make it pretty much what we like so long as we boom the district and Benton's candidature. The committee's fine, and as they all have work to do and know nothing about running a paper they will not be fussing about the office all the time."

"And the place?"

Bob shrugged his shoulders. "Well, you'll see."

Valerie looked about her, seeing the wharf, the sheds, the steamer, and the uninteresting line of low shops across the street. But the rest of the place blurred off into the pall of smoke that was choking the life out of the little flat town. Even the opposite bank of the river was clouded in a hot mystery. The Wairoa itself, usually a restless stream, dawdled along on the top of the tide, a turgid yellow, carrying charred debris gathered up by its far-off rambling tributaries, and doing nothing that a river should to cool the air or refresh the eye. It was hotter, if anything, on its surface than it was in the sandy town.

Valerie gave little thought just then to the passengers or to the people who met them, though she knew that she and Bob were being stared at. The town already knew him as the editor of the new tri-weekly paper, and it had known for some days that he was to have a woman assistant from Auckland. While this was a matter of real interest in a place that had a population of under two thousand, it was not a matter for astonishment. Nothing was a matter for astonishment in Dargaville. That was the town's pet pose.

But such of the town as met the steamer that day looked curiously at the newcomers for several reasons. Bob was the son of the Bishop of Auckland, and Valerie was the daughter of that city's cleverest and best-known lawyer, Davenport Carr. The glamour of this combined social distinction made the local dignitaries look a little weak. Not that the town would have admitted it in public. Indeed it was prepared to resist any undiplomatic move on the part of the outsiders to teach it anything with the undue haste usually showed by outsiders in impressing little towns. But it stared this day with a friendly feeling, for the two were good to look at, and the town immediately sniffed the possibility of romance.

## II

Bob and Valerie were radiantly healthy, with the kind of vitality that did not wilt even in that dissolving atmosphere. They stood tall and straight, unaware of smoke-choked lungs, their eyes untroubled by the glare that radiated off the zinc roofs of the sheds.

In spite of her tedious train and steamer journey Valerie had contrived to arrive with the air of having merely strolled out of a nearby street. She wore a plain dark linen dress with a narrow pale blue collar round the pointed neck, and a soft linen hat to match. She wore white canvas shoes that had stayed white, and white open-work cotton stockings. There was not a superfluous inch of material about her. She carried a good black travelling bag which Bob now held.

Valerie was not conventionally beautiful, but she carried an internal dynamo that shot sparks at the passerby and made him forget his manners, turn his head and won-

der who the deuce she was. And there was something in the carriage of her head, and the fashioning of her limbs and the assurance of her manner that confirmed his first impression that she was that desirable thing, somebody, not only in her own right, but with the added prestige of ancestors.

She was supple and loose-limbed and tanned from a summer spent largely in the open air. Her vitality had run over from her limbs into her amber hair. It had a curious luminousness, which caused many of her acquaintances to wonder what she did to it. She coiled it about her head in two thick ropes which usually dragged a little down her forehead, and often made her look like the queen of vampires, the very last lady of life and imagination she would have bothered to imitate. Beneath that amber hair, and beneath heavy eyebrows of the same colour, her deep-set and amused blue eyes softened a face that was a little too contemptuous, made one forget the nose, a little too strong for beauty, and antidoted a mouth that was curiously voluptuous. For the rest she had a fine skin, splendid colour, dimples, a good chin, and her head well set on a proud neck.

Bob stood over six feet, a well-developed and athletic male. The lines of his face were straight and his features cut with strength, but with little suggestion of delicacy. His heavy black eyebrows met when he frowned over humorous brown eyes that found the world a pretty good place to live in. In fact most things were pretty good to him. He had a healthy crop of coarse black hair on his well-shaped head, and it was always cut the conventional length and combed in the conventional way. He was always carefully up-to-date with his clothes, and looked exceedingly well in them. At twenty-seven he had extricated himself from the perplexities of youth and adolescence, had

had his conventional time of knocking around away from his home associations, had returned in the conventional manner to settle down to his life-work.

The main difference between these two was that you looked at Bob and dogmatized, and you looked at Valerie and wondered.

### III

After her glance about the wharf Valerie brought her eyes back to his face.

"Where am I to stay?" she asked.

"Mac's pub," he grinned.

"Oh, Lord! Beer and flies." She made a comical grimace. "Then there's nothing else?"

"No. We have tried everything. Nobody has any room, and you'd hate boarding with anyone here anyway. Mac's is all right, clean as pubs go, and the food is jolly decent, on the whole."

"Any other women stay there?"

"No."

"Thank God for that."

"Mac refused to take you at first. You see he can fill up most of the time with men who spend a lot at the bar, and women don't pay. And then, well, the pub is a bit lively sometimes. However, the committee spends a lot there, and Benton fixed it. So you are on trial. Whatever happens you must not complain about anything."

"Dash it all, Bob, did you ever hear me complain about anything?"

A broad grin spread over his face.

"Oh, yes, you've heard me complain about hosts of things, fusty old ideas, the cowardly virtues, etc., oh, yes.

But you never heard me complain about physical discomfort, now, did you?"

"No, gentle Val. And I told Mac that if you found your bedroom full of rats and the soup full of cockroaches it would be nothing to what I've seen you oblivious to, and that you would be out of the place all day and most of the evenings at the office. Oh, hullo! Here are some of the committee."

He turned as two men came round the corner of the shed.

Valerie looked keenly at Tom Allison and Ray Bolton, the bank managers of the town. One glance at them told her they would mean nothing in her life, and that they probably meant little in the lives of anybody else.

"Sorry you had to arrive on our hottest day, Miss Carr," said Allison, looking at her with a deliberately inviting and admiring gaze. Young women of manifest attractions did not constitute one of the reasons for the fame of Dargaville.

"Oh, I shan't judge the town by its hottest day," retorted Valerie.

Just then the second net full of trunks and boxes fell about their feet. She pointed out her belongings, and Bob beckoned to a carter waiting near. Then they all walked the few feet of wooden planks to the dusty sidewalk of River Street.

The bankers claimed Valerie in conversation. They assured her that Dargaville was quite a live little place, that there was a nice exclusive little set, and a good bridge club. They parted from her and Bob at the corner of Queen Street, remarking that their wives would call as soon as they returned from the coast.

Her eyes twinkled at Bob. "Is that the best the place can do?"

"Well, Benton has a good deal more juice," he smiled back.

Valerie looked curiously about her as they went on by the river. Along the bank there was a clay path, a few sheds and boathouses set on piles, and poles to which boats were moored right against the steep edge. The shops and stores faced them from the other side of the street, for this was a one-sided thoroughfare. People stood there in the doorways trying to get some air. There seemed to be a little breeze now coming out of the west. A limp farmer passed by in a creaking wagon, his horses drooping. There were several men ahead of them walking to the hotel. There were no sounds about them but the rattling and clanking of the steamer unloading at the wharf.

Soon she saw a large building looming out of the haze. It was a typical New Zealand small-town wooden hotel of two stories, with verandah and balcony along the front and down the side farthest from the centre of the town. Two men were lounging at the front door. Already she could smell the beer and feel the flies.

A large sign across part of the front told the passerby that this was the Dargaville hotel and that the proprietor was Thomas MacAlarney.

#### IV

Bob led Valerie down the near side of the house to the night entrance, along a narrow corridor to the hall, and up the back stairs to a room numbered nine without meeting a soul.

"Here you are," he said. "Now I must get to the office. I'll be back about six. If I were you I'd always use the side way. The front stairs come down beside the

public bar. This is the quiet end. I'm on one side of you and Father Ryan is on the other. The bathroom is opposite us. So long."

Bob's parting smile was meant to be heartening. He was always forgetting that sympathy was wasted on a person who persisted in regarding everything that happened, whether good or bad, as some kind of adventure.

Valerie opened her door and carried her hand-bag inside. She threw her hat on the bed, dropped into the one plain chair, wiped her face, and began a survey of the possible horrors. She saw that the room was fairly clean, that the clothes cupboard would do, that there were two pillows to the single bed, an unusually generous equipment, that the quilt was aggressively white, that the tops of the chest of drawers and the washstand were not stained as badly as many she had met before, that the pattern on the one mat had faded to a less irritating result than newness would have been, and that the wall paper did not have the one sickly greenish-yellow tone she could not possibly have endured. The worst being thus satisfactorily absent she heaved a sigh of relief. There were flies, but she had had flies before, and most of them would go with the heat. She was no victim of optimism, but when she was using a present as a means to a future it was the future and not the present that conquered her senses and her imagination.

She walked to the window swishing out the flies. She was glad to see that it opened on the balcony and she hoped that she would have it mostly to herself. She looked across the river, and could just make out the rush-fringed edge of a large swamp. She turned back and smiled into the spotted mirror that hung above the chest of drawers.

"Well," she thought, "we begin again."

## V

She sat down on her bed wondering whether her luggage would be brought up or whether she would have to go in search of it. She knew there was no service beyond the weekly cleaning of her room and the providing of meals. There had been no maid visible in the hall, and none would ever come. There were no bells to ring. Some time she would have to capture her chambermaid and see what could be done with her. She took some soap out of her bag and a towel off the rack, and walked out to the bath-room. A porter was dragging her largest trunk down the hall linoleum.

"Fine," she said as he came up to her. "I was wondering what I should do about it."

He straightened his back, and to her surprise touched his forehead. She looked into the approving blue eyes of a thin, seedy Irishman whose favourite occupation was advertised somewhat blatantly in the colour of his nose.

"Ah, and it's the heat you've brought, miss," he said, wiping his face with his sleeve.

"More than usual?"

"Shure. It has been cool till this. I'm thinking it won't be very comfortable here for a lady."

"I shall be all right. I can be all right anywhere. Do you belong to the house?"

"Indeed and I do."

"Fine. If I get into any trouble I'll come to you. What's your name?"

"It's Michael O'Shay I am, miss. And I'll tell Nancy to take the good care of you. I'll be after her when I go down."

"No, no, thanks. Don't do that. The girls are probably resting now, and if they are not they ought to be.



There's nothing I want, really. I hate disturbing tired girls."

He beamed at her.

"God bless you for a kind one, miss. He might have made a few more while He was about it. But I must be after working."

When he was returning for the last time Valerie wondered whether she should tip him. She wished she had asked Bob what the custom here was. The minute she reached for her purse she saw she had made a mistake.

"Nothing from a lady like yourself, miss," said Michael with a hurt look.

"Indeed no, Michael. But I want you to go and get me a bottle of ale, and bring it up here. Can you do that for a thirsty person?"

"Indeed and I can," and with a look that included her in a secret fellowship, he went off to return in a few minutes with a bottle, a corkscrew, a tumbler and sixpence change.

She waved back the coin. "You must drink that to me for good luck in Dargaville," she said gaily.

"God love you, miss, and there'll never be anything but good luck for the likes of you." He opened her bottle, touched his forehead again, and backed out gallantly.

Valerie drank her ale, and after a cold shower began to unpack. She heard no sound immediately about her till Bob knocked on her door at a quarter past six.

## VI

She looked with interest round the large dining-room, for there were all sorts of men sitting at the small square tables. Bob led her to one in the corner almost under their rooms.

"Is Mac here?" she asked as they sat down.

"No. He eats late. You may not see him for days, and he won't take any notice of you."

She looked at the place set opposite his. "Who sits there?"

"Father Ryan. I thought you would not mind. He has always sat here. He is a charming gentleman. He's away to-night. Why, here's Benton."

He rose to meet a large, loosely-built man in dusty riding clothes who sauntered with spurs jingling down the room towards them. Roger Benton was wiping his face with a handkerchief that would have scandalized his wife at that moment. He held out a big hairy, tanned hand to Valerie and dropped into the priest's chair.

"I meant to be at the steamer, Miss Carr. I promised my wife I would, but my horse cast a shoe the other side of Te Koperu, and delayed me. How's your father?" He looked at her out of gay lazy bluish-gray eyes.

"Fine, thanks." She looked him over quickly, liking his boyish frankness and country comfortableness.

"Join us for dinner, Benton," said Bob.

"No, thanks, I'm on my way to the camp. I just dropped in to greet Miss Carr. I hope you will like us." His eyes rested on her again with a vague intentness. He thought her very stunning.

"I hope so too," she retorted mischievously.

"It's a small town but we manage to knock some fun out of it," he went on.

"I shall like a great deal about it, but I'm not promising to like the things I shall be expected to like."

He looked a little uncertainly into her amused eyes. "Mrs. Benton wants you to come along on Sunday afternoon to the camp, you and Lorrimer," he said.

She hesitated a moment. But the word camp had

magic in it. And then she felt she could hardly refuse this first invitation. "Thanks. I shall like to come."

"That's good. Anything you want me for, Lorri-mer?" He stood up.

"I think not. Things are going all right."

Roger went off, nodding at every table he passed.

Then Bob turned to the waitress who had come up and was standing glancing at Valerie.

"Lizzie," he said informally, "this is Miss Carr."

Valerie smiled up at her and without a word established between herself and the girl the understanding that existed between her and all people who ever served her. When Lizzie had departed with their order she turned to Bob.

"What did he mean by the camp?"

"It's out on the coast. The élite have cottages there."

## VII

After dinner when Bob had returned to the office Valerie continued her unpacking. She shed most of her clothes for the purpose. Through her open window came intermittent sounds of voices and laughter from the bar, but nothing passed by along the street. A little before ten o'clock something brought her upstanding, taut, like a listening animal. She bounded out on the balcony, forgetting she had on only a shirt and bloomers and was visible from the street. She looked upstream whence the exciting sounds had come, and saw a green and a red light and then the outlines of a little steamer and a big ship filigreed against the dull radiance of a hazy rising moon. She drew a long breath as the small boat tugged and the great ship glided past the hotel, so near that she could have thrown a stone upon the decks. She heard the sounds of strong, hoarse voices and the clanking of

chains mingling with the pompous throb of the engine in the tug. She blew a sentimental wish to the unknown men on their way to sea, and she stood till she could no longer see any evidences of their passing. . . . Then she was arrested by another sound. Through the clammy silence of the night there advanced and retreated the unmistakable roll of the ocean breaking on a long beach. She hung her head over the balcony the better to hear.

She heard Bob's steps along the hall. She rushed to his window and poked in her head.

"Bob," she began excitedly, as he opened his door. "You didn't tell me we could hear the sea."

"Val! Good heavens, what are you doing? What? The sea? Yes, the coast is only four miles away." He came up to the window. He was very tired.

"But, Bob, how wonderful! Do we always hear it?"

"Yes, when it is still. I say, Val, really, you must not go out on the balcony like that. The pub is closing, and the men come round this side of the house to the stables. They mustn't see us here. You know, you must be a little discreet."

"Oh hell, Bob. You are getting to be an old grandmother. Good-night." She ran her hands viciously through his hair, patted his cheek more kindly, and with an absurdly furtive air crept back along the wall to her window.

The weary Bob was asleep in a quarter of an hour, but Valerie lay for some time listening to the surf beating like a pulse in the heart of the stifled town.

## VIII

When she walked into the dining-room the next morning Bob had vanished and Father Ryan was drinking his sec-

ond cup of coffee. There were a few stragglers scattered at the tables, men who had lived not wisely but too well in the recent past and looked as if they were doubtful about the blessing of surviving to greet another day.

The priest rose and drew out her chair. Father Ryan was small and thin and exquisite. His hair was like white floss silk, and his bright blue eyes were both keen and mild. He looked at Valerie as the other men had done with obvious admiration, but the quality of his approval was a very different thing.

"I hope the heat did not keep you from sleep," he said, after they had greeted each other.

"It did not, thanks. I slept much too well. I meant to be down at eight. But that's not the first good intention of mine that has gone wrong."

She was pleased to see that he gave her a quick smile.

As she ate her eggs and bacon she asked him questions about his parish. She was glad to think she would have his voice to listen to, for he spoke the most beautiful English in the world, the English of the Irish scholar. He sat with her till she had finished, and bowed her through the door with a manner that made her feel as if she were in a mediæval tale.

She could see little of the town as she walked to the office. She had no idea of the extent of it as it straggled along the river with its broad streets and many open lots. It was almost entirely a one-story town, the largest on the Wairoa, and the only one to have banks and now a paper of its own. It was the terminus of a railway that ran eighteen miles north into one of the finest kauri forests of the country. But nobody knew just why it had happened to grow where it did, for it was on the narrowest part of a great barren tongue of land that stretched from the Kaipara heads for the best part of sixty miles between the

river and the sea with not a thing to attract settlement except the depth of the river on that side. It had no water supply save the uncertain one of rainfall. It faced a great swamp. But it was now the growing town of a prosperous and booming timber and dairying district.

It was the river that most interested Valerie as she walked along. It was the best commercial waterway in the North Island, and on its upper reaches it was hauntingly beautiful. It stretched away into gumfields and remote valleys. Little steamers and launches fussed continually upon its strong current, and at any moment a ship might come gliding round a bend.

But Dargaville had its distinction. It was blasé, and liked to say the world came to its doors. It was used to the unusual, to men who had roamed the whole earth, to all the types that go down to the sea in ships. Governors and members of Parliament passed through it to shoot. Newly arrived Englishmen came spying out the land. Remittance men came to its banks to cash orders signed by titled names. And it was used, too, to seeing bodies that had been fished out of the river covered with an old sheet and carried on a stretcher into Mac's hotel. It was used to seeing the constable marching solemnly between painted ladies who had just arrived from Auckland, and who had to be returned by the steamer by which they came without damage to the morals of the youth of the town and before they could escape to the bush.

Dargaville had not been astonished when a woman doctor took charge of the Aratapu hospital, three miles down the river. So it had taken calmly the information that the new paper would have a woman on the editorial staff. Nor was it unduly surprised to learn later that the woman was young and amazing, and that she was living in Mac's hotel.

Valerie walked on as Bob had directed her till she came to a low, narrow building standing between two open lots. The paper had been housed in a store on the fringe of the town near the railway station. There she saw trucks of sawn timber which was being loaded into a brig at the short wharf. Train sheds blackened by smoke straggled along both sides of the line in the direction of the ticket office which was a couple of blocks inland. She crossed the street with her eyes on the unpretentious construction that was to house more than she ever dreamed. A newly painted sign, *The Dargaville News*, dwarfed its size and diminished the proportions of the one broad window, which had been whitewashed inside half-way up. She knew it was probably the smallest and meanest newspaper office in the colony, but she had learned not to despise beginnings.

As she stood a moment considering it she could hear Bob's voice inside giving orders to somebody, and the monotonous throb of machinery in the rear. Feeling as if she had cast something behind her forever, she put her foot on the log step and jumped into a narrow passage partitioned from the office for a distance of six feet by glazed glass. Past it she looked across a high sloping counter down at Bob. He was leaning over a desk by the opposite wall, and while he wrote he was telling a dark boy of extraordinary aliveness to get a certain advertisement back from the foreman. Valerie whistled the notes of the tui's spring song. Bob spun round on his chair and got to his feet. The dark boy, after one unabashed stare at her, darted into the composing-room to tell the staff that she had come.

"I'm ready for anything," she said.

"I never knew you when you weren't," grinned Bob.

## CHAPTER II

### I

**W**HEN Bob introduced her to him Valerie saw the importance of Jimmy to the *Dargaville News*. Indeed, Jimmy did more than work with the energy of six boys. He cast a glamour over the littered office and the second-hand machinery and the smelly composing-room. His work was more to him than a job, those circumscribing four walls fell down before his roving eyes, and the cantankerous old printing machine was an enemy after his own heart.

Jimmy was a boy of uncertain fatherhood, and the eldest of a family of five. When he was an inconvenient infant his mother had come to Dargaville dressed as a young widow, and though obviously not of the servant class had begun to keep herself and her child by doing washing. Women who watched her suspected that she set her teeth on this work, and one day one of them asked her if she could sew, and offered to start her as a dressmaker. And Jimmy's mother became one of the best sewers in the town. Then she married a decent youth employed in Roger Benton's stores. They had four children, the youngest but a baby, when the father was killed in an accident. The town rallied to help the game little woman whose children were always clean and well behaved, a subscription was got up for her, and she started out again as a dressmaker.

Jimmy had known for years that a great responsibility rested on his shoulders. He had to show the town that it had not wasted its time when it had helped his mother.



He had just left school and was looking for work when there was talk of the coming paper. But it did not occur to him at first that it would have anything so wonderful as a job for a boy.

He was fishing off the station wharf when one of his school friends told him he had just heard a boy was wanted for it. He jumped up, left his line and bait, and ran along the river to the office where two men were unloading the new jobbing machine. He was told the boss had gone to lunch. He ran all the way to Mac's hotel, stopped panting in the hall, hesitated a moment about storming the dining-room, but bursting with anxiety lest he be too late he stuck his head in at the door. He saw Bob Lorrimer eating alone, quite unconscious of the portentous power he seemed, and got a fit of horrid funk, but conquering it as he did Red Indians in his dreams, he strode hot and grubby and fishy to Bob's table, and stood nervously twisting his cap in his hands. He was sick with shame at feeling the eyes of the room upon him, and humiliated by the sight of his filthy fingers, but still something supported him in that dreadful moment.

"Please, sir," he began miserably, as Bob looked at him.

"Well, son, what do you want?" asked the arbiter of fate quite amiably.

"Please, sir, I heard you want a boy, a boy for the paper."

Jimmy ached to sink into the earth as Bob covered him with a shrewd glance. He could not know that the man was immediately prepossessed in his favour.

Jimmy was a short stocky boy with very bright brown eyes and bronze-tinted hair. Usually his round face shone with some secret amusement of his own at the world about him, an amusement curiously mingled with the solicitude he had acquired from helping a tired mother and keeping a

watchful eye on little ones. Bob did not see the solicitude at this moment, but he saw something that held him. He knew the job mattered enormously to Jimmy.

"Do you really want to work, son?" he asked. "It will be hard work."

"Yes, please, sir."

"What have you done?"

Jimmy drooped pitifully. "I—I haven't done anything, sir. I've just left school."

"What standard have you passed?"

"The sixth, sir. I'm fourteen." There was nothing boastful about the latter statement, but it was given hopefully.

"What's your name?"

"Jimmy Paul, sir."

"All right. Come to the office at nine to-morrow morning, Jimmy."

The boy stared at him swallowing hard. "Will—will you take me, sir?" He could not realize it was done.

"Yes, Jimmy, I'll try you. You can be a fine help to me if you really want to work, and I'll pay you what you are worth. I'll see you at nine to-morrow."

But Jimmy still stood fumbling with his cap, unable to move. And Bob understood.

"I say, Jimmy, do you know any boys who would help to deliver the paper at night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fine. You pick out three of the best and bring them with you in the morning. They must be reliable, you understand, and be willing to stay on the job. They must be ready to come along after school if they're still at it. They'll get a commission on the papers they sell and a wage for delivering. And it will take an hour or more

according to the number of regular boys you can get. I'd like three at least. Can you look them up this afternoon?"

"Yes, sir."

And bursting with pride at this amazing trust in him, and with eyes that would have lit up a dark night, he strode out of the dining-room and dashed off to tell his mother that he had the grandest boy's job in the town.

Bob smiled after him. He had been told by the committee the night before that Jimmy was the boy he should get, but even without that recommendation he would have known Jimmy was the boy. And Bob was satisfied with the three that Jimmy brought with him the next morning, and saw that it was a regular boy gang with its acknowledged code and leadership and loyalty.

When Valerie arrived Jimmy was managing his runners, and trying not to be lordly about it, for his mother had impressed on him that pride goeth before a fall. He counted out their papers, checked up their sales and returns, put the pennies into a cash-box of his own and entered each boy's record in a three-penny note-book that was the treasure of his life. He would have died to save it from injury, and he never had a more wonderful moment than when after Bob had audited and balanced it for the first time, he had turned with the words, "First rate, Jimmy. Not a mistake. Go on as you have done this week and I'll raise your salary at the end of the month."

And listening to him that night his tired mother dreamt wonderful dreams for him, mingled with hopes of rest some day for herself.

But Jimmy did much more than manage the runners. He swept out the office and the composing-room, he sharpened the pencils, filled the inkwells, washed the paste

brushes, filed the papers and exchanges, ran all the errands, greased the machinery. He helped the foreman to make up, and he learned to set type and to follow copy. And all these things he did as if the world moved only because they were done.

"What a gorgeous boy," said Valerie to Bob at the end of the second day. "This place is a continuous revel for him."

"Yes, and you'll be part of the revel soon."

"Well, that won't hurt him," she retorted.

## II

Valerie was alone in the building at four o'clock the following Saturday afternoon for Bob had gone off to report a dairy conference, and the staff had also gone, as they did at the week-end when possible, since it was not a publishing day. She had just smiled the last of them out with the comfortable feeling that she would have no antagonisms there. From the first day she had regarded them as co-workers with herself, and her friendly attitude had been returned with good measure. She knew that the foreman Ryder, and the jobbing-man Johnson, and the leading woman typesetter, Miss Hands, who had all been brought from Auckland, were sophisticated artisans ready to jump at the first pin prick, but because she had read history with insight, and understood the background that had contributed to their sensitiveness, and because she had in herself no class consciousness, she met them frankly on the ground of common interest, eager to learn all they could teach her.

And she had won their gratitude by insisting that awnings be provided for the windows of the composing-room, a matter Bob had let slide.

Valerie leaned back in her chair stretching herself. She

had to admit she was tired with the long hours and the unusual weather. She had worked till after ten every night. She had as yet seen nothing of the town. Her only exalted moments had been those when timber vessels had gone by. And it was wonderful to look through the clear upper half of the office window across the dusty road, past a fringe of rushes, and to see stealing into the smoke cloud on the river a phantom ship slipping from nowhere into nowhere, like the fabrication of a dream. She thought of one that had gone by that morning, a black brig etched in for a few unforgettable minutes in a world of vagueness before it faded out.

She was glad she had come. It was good to have a real job, to feel that she was independent, that at last she had got clear away from the relatives and their set, and that a new world was before her.

She worked on till after half-past six. She saw she would have to come back after dinner and probably the next morning. But then there was the afternoon when she would walk with Bob to the coast. The thought of the open sea lifted her spirits. She closed her books, locked the front door behind her, and turned towards the hotel. It was half-past seven when she reached the dining-room.

It seemed to her to be unusually full of men. Then she remembered that it was Saturday night, pay night, half holiday night for the bushes and the mills, and she was prepared for it to be noisy till late. That dining-room at the end of a hot day would have wrecked the nerves of a sensitive person who had not a sense of humour. Colossal designs had been an obsession with the decorator employed by Mac to do the house up in style. The wall paper was heavily embossed with gigantic dark brown chrysanthemums which stood out in a manner that made it

surprising that pictures could be hung against them. The pictures, with the exception of one of a ship, were advertisements of whiskies, ales and stouts set in wide gilt frames that had not been cleaned since the house was built. The room was high, but a varnished ceiling and a high varnished dado, to the height of five feet all round it, diminished its liberal proportions. A huge sideboard blatantly displayed enormous pieces of silver that had apparently been designed to show how many bunches of grapes could be moulded to the square foot. Competing for attention were bowls and bottles of cut glass ravined and cliffed like a mountainous land. The two smaller sideboards that held piles of plates and silver for the tables were dwarfed to an undeserved insignificance. It was evident that the linoleum had been intended to match the wall paper. But the intention was better than the result. The eight windows along one side were hung with curtains of lace no longer white, elaborate in pattern and heavy with a design to match the silverware. Stretched in the wash to different lengths they formed an irregular line above the floor, and threatened in places to trail upon it. The room was lit with four gas lamps suspended from the centre.

But hideous as it all was, it was one of the cleanest rooms of its kind. The campaign against flies was vigorous, varied and continuous. Every sugar bowl and milk jug and butter cooler and bread board was protected with circles of netting hung round the border with heavy blue beads. The table-cloths were changed twice a week and the floor washed daily.

To Valerie this was ugliness carried to the point of humour. And then it was inevitable. She could not change it. And she had as extraordinary a patience with disagreeable facts as she had extraordinary an impatience with disagreeable ideas.

This night as she walked to her table her feet dragged a little. She was relieved to see Father Ryan was away for she could not have exerted herself to talk. She sat down, sympathized with Lizzie who looked pale, and glanced idly about the tables near her. A little way off a tweeded Englishman and another man eating with him returned her casual look. The Englishman did not particularly interest her, but the other one did for she saw it was Doctor Steele, of whom Bob had talked significantly.

The doctor was the best physician and surgeon on the river. He was also a man with a skeleton in the cupboard, only it was a skeleton that never stayed in the cupboard, but danced grimacing upon the public streets to the scandal of the passerby. He had a wife who was a pathological case or a vile old hag according as to whether the critic were scientific or emotional. Men often wondered why the doctor allowed her to live on with him, but he was of those who having once loved a woman recognized some obligation to care for her ever afterwards. In the hotel Mac saw to it that he had peace, for he once, in a notable passage of arms, had informed the lady in no uncertain terms that she could not set foot in his house. The doctor spent most of his leisure time there. He never drank to excess. His great diversion was poker which he played incessantly with anyone who came along, caring nothing whether he lost or won.

Valerie looked beyond him down the crowded room, and at once her eyes were held by a figure at a table on a line with her own at the other end. It was Mac's table, and now for the first time she saw him there. She stared curiously till, raising his face, he caught her fixed gaze. She instantly looked away, and then had a funny feeling of self-consciousness as she felt his hard scrutiny. She went on eating without raising her head till someone came

up to her table. It was Michael, with a tray and a glass and a bottle of wine.

"Mac's compliments, miss," he said with a sly smile, as he poured her out some.

She was absurdly pleased. She looked down the room, waited till Mac looked back at her, and then she raised her glass and drank to him. He answered her by a jerky movement intended to be some kind of salute. And that was her introduction to Thomas MacAlarney. Almost a week went by before she spoke to him.

### III

The owner of the Dargaville hotel was the largest and most inarticulate Irishman in New Zealand. He was, for his race, singularly unapproachable. He had been born in Australia three months after his parents arrived there, and had early become a nomad about the gold fields. It was at Calgoorlie and Coolgardie that he made the money he afterwards put into the hotel business. He had drifted to New Zealand and Dargaville as men drift about the colonies, and finding only one poorly run house he had settled there and set himself out to get the trade.

Many adjectives would slip to the tongue at the first sight of him, but not the word prepossessing. He stood six feet two and required the seating space of two ordinary men. But he was not a floppy fat man. His enormous stomach was hard, his great arms were hard. The clutch of his hand was as inescapable as that of fate. His tomato-coloured skin looked very dry and shiny if he had just washed and very damp if he had not. He had a large round head covered with a lot of coarse gray hair, and a pointed beard always tidily trimmed. Heavy black eyebrows that showed hardly a streak of gray bristled



over his protruding blue eyes in a manner that alarmed small boys, and, indeed, many an adult when he frowned. The eyes themselves had a curious expression of mingled amusement and hostility. He looked at all people with a fixed hard stare, and one had to know him for some time to realize that he did not crave to murder the whole human race.

He was never known to wear a coat save at the start and end of his annual trip to Auckland. No tailor seemed equal to the task of making his vests capacious enough, for he was never seen in one that was not split down the back. But his shirts and trousers were impeccable and his boots always brushed.

In his hotel he was an autocrat. Though his house was public in the eyes of the law, there were people he would not allow to set foot in it, and he had ways of making the local law agree with him. It was his pride that he ran the best public house in the north of New Zealand. He sold unadulterated liquor even before the prohibition party got after the trade, and he gave the best shilling dinner in the country. He was famous for it. He never allowed a drunken man to be seen leaving his house. He had two rooms beside his stables at the back with cots in them, and there he calmly dumped and locked up the obstreperous drinkers till they should be able to walk off without attracting the attention of the constable. He felt it was only fair to keep them out of the clutches of the law.

Thomas MacAlarney rarely spoke to a woman other than his servants, whom he managed himself. Few people suspected that he was mortally afraid of the sex and confused in its presence. He was conscious of his vocabulary, which was liable to be unprintable at any moment, and having but little knowledge of the English or any other

language apart from its curses and violent epithets he was not equal to the amenities of ordinary conversation.

He had an uncanny knowledge of all that went on under his roof. He took great care of his girls and men knew it was not safe to flirt with them. The newspaper committee had had hard work to persuade him to take Valerie, but they did not guess his real reason for hesitancy, which was that he was almost certain she would not be comfortable. It solved the problem a little to have the priest on one side of her and Bob on the other. Otherwise he would have felt bound to leave empty the rooms next her. But at the end of a week he was easy in his mind. He knew she smoked cigarettes in her room, that she had twice ordered ale with her lunch, that Father Ryan called her a remarkable woman, that she gave no trouble, and that already his servants adored her.

## CHAPTER III

### I

**I**T was in high spirits that Valerie set off the next afternoon with Bob to walk to the coast. A heavy thunderstorm in the night had cleared the air and set the dust, and a breeze had swept the river and the town of the haze that had obscured them for over a week. As they went up Queen Street she looked curiously at the banks, the land offices, the law offices, the Native Land Court building and Roger Benton's large general store all bunched together near River Street, and beyond them up the rise at the houses and gardens that made this the aristocratic thoroughfare.

She saw that the whole place was heat worn. The gardens and lawns were brown. The blistering sun had peeled the paint off the white walls. There were no large trees anywhere, but only shrubs to break the glare.

When they had gone by the last cottage and were surrounded by the stunted vegetation on the flat above Valerie stopped, looked back and drew a long breath. There was more of a view than she had imagined. She gazed away across the river, over the miles of flax and cabbage trees in the swamp at hills and valleys girdled about with shadows. There were hills and valleys to the south and hills and valleys to the north, all checkered with the shapes of the clouds that were trailing over the face of the sun. To the east and south she saw fields, the glow of grain, innumerable specs of sheep and cattle, the white spots of houses, the red roofs of barns, water towers, clumps of Scotch firs, green spots marking the sources of

springs, all the signs of a prosperous land, but she liked better the uncertainty, the magic and mystery that the northern hills hid beneath their wealth of bush.

They turned their faces to the sea. They dropped into little dips and mounted little rises, alternately seeing and losing sight of the sand-dunes to the left of them and the reddish white cliffs to the right. There was not a sizable tree to be seen on this flatness set up between the river and the ocean till you came to the hills that rose suddenly out of it on the north. Nothing but pampas grass and fern and low scrub would grow on its niggardly soil.

They swung along happily, startling myriads of grasshoppers and small brown butterflies that lived in some miraculous manner upon the dead sticks. Soon it became harder to walk, and their feet sank in the heavy sand. And the air was now filled with the roar of the sea.

As they cleared a mound, all unexpectedly glory was spread about their feet. They stood at the head of an S-shaped ravine that cut into the coast-line, dividing a stretch of sand-hills from a stretch of cliffs. It was deep and green with forest trees fed from a spring that gushed out at its head to fall in a series of cataracts on to a shallow stony bed, and so out across the beach below. In layers between the dunes and the cliffs the gap was striped with low sand-banks, a bit of white beach, a narrow line of lazy surf and a stretch of azure sea. Coming to it thus across the miles of hot aridity, the gully was a wonder of coolness and vivid colour and sweet scents.

The road dipped suddenly and a turn showed them the first waterfall. Valerie was furious to see iron pipes leading from it.

"Of course they had to ruin it?" she exploded.

Further down the trees met above them and they

seemed to have sunk deep into a green nest with the sound of the waves lowered to a whisper floating away over their heads.

"Oh, how I should love to have a tent down here and come to sleep. Who owns it?"

"Benton, of course. He owns almost everything about Dargaville."

Round the next corner they saw through the trees a little way off a row of five small cottages. Anything that stood in rows annoyed Valerie.

"The fools," she sneered. "Don't they see enough of each other in the town? Good heavens! I hope we are not going to meet them all."

"I'm afraid we are. They were gathered to meet me two weeks ago. But they mean to be kind."

"Damn it, Bob, don't talk such rot. If they had asked Miss Hands I might grant that, but you know perfectly well they don't mean to be kind. I wouldn't have come if I had thought twice. At least I'm not going to know here anybody I don't want to know. I'm not going to waste time that way."

Bob grinned. "This will make you madder still, they all think you and I are engaged."

"Oh, hell, Bob, what does it matter what they think?"

They found the adult population of the gully gathered on the Benton verandah and at the mere sight of them Valerie's eyes glared.

"Now, Val," whispered Bob, "do be decent. The poor devils didn't make themselves."

But it must be confessed that Valerie behaved badly. It was nothing to her that it was the inner circle of Dargaville that was lolling languidly there on deck chairs consumed with a curiosity it was trying not to show about the much talked of daughter of Davenport Carr. She

knew well enough that it was only because Bob was a bishop's son and she the privileged child of the most powerful family in the Remuera set that they were greeted with the effusive and deferential politeness that so irritated her. She was furious to think she would have to sit there with them when she craved to be on the beach.

And then she saw as she sat down that nearly every woman present looked as soon as she could at her left hand to see if there was an engagement ring upon it. The poor souls did not know it but that completed their utter nonentity as far as she was concerned. She did like Mrs. Benton, who was a very attractive woman, but she could not forgive her all in a minute for imposing the rest of Dargaville upon her. Bob did his level best to counteract the difficult atmosphere she created, and he was as thankful as she was when the visitors finally rose to go. They were no sooner away than the Benton children invaded the verandah, five of them, and Valerie instantly became another person.

"Would you like to come on the beach?" asked Marjorie, looking up at her confidently.

"Indeed I would. That is just what I have been wishing to do all the afternoon. I wonder why it is that children and dogs are the only things that ever know what I want."

"Really, Val," protested Bob indignantly.

She turned to Mrs. Benton with an irresistible smile and gesture. "Mrs. Benton, I've been abominably rude. But I may as well do it once and be done with it. I loathe social entertainment, and I haven't fought my family for years on the subject to come here and begin all over again. Of course you have to be nice to everybody. That is the price you pay for being married to a parliamentary candidate. But I'm not, you see."

Mrs. Benton was soothed by something in those twinkling blue eyes, and though astonished was flattered at the implication that she was not damned with the rest.

Tommy Benton seized Valerie by the hand. "Do you like fires on the beach?" he asked.

"More than anything in the world," she said warmly.

"Suppose we have a picnic tea," suggested Roger.

"Oh, please do," said Valerie, "if it will not be too much trouble."

So she set off with him and the children, leaving Bob to help Mrs. Benton. Valerie got on well with Roger who was predisposed to like all women, especially the daring ones. As they reached the sand-hills she caught sight of a tent roof under the shade of trees against the cliffs to the right. It was well isolated from the rest of the camp.

"A tent," she exclaimed, stopping suddenly. "Who lives in it?"

"It belongs to Barrington."

"Barrington! What Barrington?" She tried to keep the astonishment she instantly felt out of her voice.

"Dane Barrington, the writer." He looked curiously at her. "Do you know him?"

"I have not met him. I know his work, of course. And dad knows him. What is he doing here?"

"He lives here, that is, up the Wairoa. Has been up here about a year. Lives like a hermit." He saw she was enormously interested.

But she said no more, and just then they came out upon the open beach. The ocean washed before them along an unbroken coast-line for more than fifty miles, and stretched away towards the Australian shore with the glitter of the afternoon sun still hot upon it. Valerie stretched out her arms and began to run and shout and gather firewood with the children. They had a fine pile

by the time Mrs. Benton and Bob appeared with the baskets. Both Roger and his wife forgave her for the afternoon before the picnic meal was over. No parents could long have been annoyed with a girl who was so obviously delighted with their children. They both noticed that she paid very little attention to Bob.

As they walked back to the gully in the twilight Valerie's mood changed again. She kept looking at the colours fading out of the sky, and when they turned in off the beach she glanced enviously at the tent snuggled there and now lit from within by the light of a lamp. She wanted to go and peep through the flap, wanted desperately to see the man who was wise enough to be alone there. But it was a stupid world. She could not follow all her impulses.

Roger Benton returned to Dargaville with her and Bob. While the two men talked business Valerie mooned along thinking her own thoughts. They left her at River Street to go to the office. She was in no mood to go inside. She wandered along the flat uninteresting road in the direction of Aratapu. She was not in the least ashamed of her rudeness of the afternoon. If she had been nice, she reflected, invitations to dinner would have been the result. In the end these people would have learned that she did not want to have anything to do with them. She cared nothing for the fact that the men she had met were her bosses on the paper. What they paid her for was her work, and she would show them she could do that. And she chuckled to think that because her father had lent them money they would have to take her as they found her.

And then there slipped into her mind the picture of the tent lit from within, and snuggled against the cliffs. She wondered if Dane Barrington ever came to the hotel.



## II

Valerie had discovered the piano the day after her arrival, but it was not till two evenings after she had been to the coast that she had the leisure to try it. Nancy, her chambermaid, told her there was a sitting-room in front of the hotel.

"Nobody ever sits in it, miss," she said.

It was a dreadful room, but like the dining-room it was to Valerie so ugly that it was funny. She went at once to the piano. It was a fairly good make and almost new, but it was out of tune and stiff for want of use. She wondered if Mac would mind her playing. As a compliment to him she began with Irish airs. Soon she heard the sounds of men's voices below, beginning diffidently, and then ringing out till they filled the house with the roar of a strong masculine chorus. She gave them chancies and drinking songs, and found there was some response to all.

A little before nine o'clock a man of medium height and lazy grace, who was walking towards the hotel, paused to listen as lines from one of his favourite songs floated out to him. "Wrap me up in my old stable jacket, and say a poor buffer lies low, lies low."

Dane Barrington had not heard that song for years. It gave a pleasant lift to his spirits which were sadly in need of elevation. He walked in and stood outside the bar door. Men were gathered there and half-way up the stairs.

"Who's playing?" he asked someone.

"Dunno."

The song ended and after a moment another tune began. An Englishman leaning against the post at the foot

of the stairway started to hum it, but he could not remember the words. Moved by a sudden impulse Dane mounted a few steps and waited for Valerie to begin the air again. Then his voice rang out in a hushed silence, "Drink to me only with thine eyes," and until he had finished the second verse there was not a sound in the house. There was a burst of applause and calls for more, but he shook his head, slipped down the stairs, and disappeared along the hall looking for Mac who was not about the bar.

Thrilled at the piano, and wondering who on earth had that tenor voice, Valerie had begun "Come into the Garden, Maud," and was grievously disappointed that the voice did not go on. She played one more old English air, but the company below had drifted back to the bar, and having given it its entertainment she turned to Beethoven.

Dane found Mac in a private room with Doctor Steele and a government inspector.

"Who's playing, Mac?" he asked.

"Miss Carr, I guess."

"Who's she?"

"Where the bloody hell have you been? Davenport Carr's girl, you know. She's come to the *News*."

"Oh." Dane sat down and ordered whisky.

"Have a game?" asked Mac.

"Yes, presently." He held his head as if he were listening. Michael brought in the drinks. Dane's attention wandered. He stood up.

"I say, that's music. I want to listen to it for a while. I'll be back."

His desertion of them did not annoy or astonish the men left behind.

Dane went upstairs to Mac's room which was next the

sitting-room. He flung himself down on the big bed with his right arm across his eyes and lay still. He stayed there till Valerie stopped at ten o'clock. He heard her go off along the hall. He wondered if she were staying here. He wondered why on earth a daughter of Davenport Carr had come to Dargaville to go on the paper, to go on any paper anywhere when she could play like that. After a minute or two of speculation he got up and went downstairs.

It was not till the next day at lunch time that Valerie got a chance to ask Michael who the singer was, and if there was anyone in the place who could tune the piano.

That evening she went down to dinner ahead of Bob. They were under no obligation to eat at the same time. She was hardly seated when Mac entered the room and walked up to her table. It was the first time she had seen him at close range. She smiled up at him rather uncertainly. The hard light in his eyes did not change.

"Good-evening, Mr. MacAlarney," she began tentatively.

"Mr. WHAT?" he roared.

Then her face broke into the smile that was the pass-key to the hearts of all who saw it light up that way.

"Am I to call you Mac?"

"Well you bloody well do, don't you?"

"It is easier," she said lightly, not in the least disturbed by his superfluous word.

"You want the piano tuned?" he went on gruffly.

"Well, if I might pay ——"

"Damn the bloody expense. I'll have it done if you want it."

"You don't mind my playing?"

"No. Play whenever you want to." And without another word he turned and walked heavily off.

Valerie decided as she looked after him that though his manners might be a little unæsthetic she would not have any difficulty with his spirit.

She found him equally reasonable when she approached him on the subject of keeping a horse, which was to be her only luxury. She had already spoken to Roger Benton about one he was willing to sell.

Mac talked in staccato sentences guarding his words.

"You'd better graze it. Just give it a feed when you ride it. It can go in my paddock. Two bob a week. That's my charge. Michael will fetch it when you want it. Or you can get it yourself. You can pay for feeds as you get 'em. Shilling a feed."

"And if I'm out late may I put it in the stable myself without troubling anybody?"

"Any bloody time you want," he said, relapsing into spontaneity.

## CHAPTER IV

### I

**B**OB, Valerie and Father Ryan lingered at their table after dinner. There were only two other men in the room. The priest had been talking of a strange family he had visited that day up the line.

"One wonders what it is that holds such people together," he said.

"It's because they are tame," said Valerie. "Fear of the unknown and lack of an adventurous spirit." She nodded down the room at Mac who came in as she was speaking and sat down at his table. "Do you think it's religion?" she went on turning again to Father Ryan.

"Well, I wouldn't dogmatize about that," he smiled.

"You know, you're no good for an argument. You never come out and say anything that one can talk against."

"You deprive her of an awful lot of pleasure," grinned Bob.

The priest smiled into her pugilistic eyes. "I'm not as sure as you are about many things," he said softly.

Bob chuckled.

"I'm not as sure as I seem, but it amuses me ——"

Bob turned his head to see what had stopped her so abruptly.

A man had entered at the other end of the room and had sat down with Mac. His appearance in the most gilded dining-room in the world would have been arresting. There it was miraculous.

"Is that Dane Barrington?" asked Valerie, knowing that it was.

"Yes," Bob answered.

"Have you met him?"

"I've been introduced to him."

"It's funny you never told me he was here."

"He isn't here. He lives out somewhere. Comes to the pub occasionally to gamble and drink."

Her eyes flashed. "Dear charitable old Bob, so sweet and wholesome?" she sneered.

Bob got red.

"Now, children," said Father Ryan, spreading out his peaceful hands. "Mr. Barrington would tell you that no man was worth that remark."

"Do you know him, Father?" she asked.

"I don't think anybody knows him."

"But you don't judge him by what is said of him?"

"I've nothing to do with judging him."

Valerie shot her eyes significantly intensified at Bob.

He got up to go.

"I'm going to have another cup of coffee," she said. "Oh, you needn't stay, Bob. Are you going off to the Bentons right away?"

"Yes, I am."

"All right. Good-night. You'll be back Monday morning?"

"Yes." Bob strode out of the dining-room annoyed with himself for being angry about nothing.

Father Ryan made a move to rise.

"Oh, stay and talk to me," said Valerie, beckoning to Lizzie. "I'll have another cup of coffee, please. It's just silly," she went on as the girl moved away, "that one man should judge another on hearsay."

She was staring frankly now at Dane Barrington. Beside Mac he looked like a boy. Mac was a canvas in heroic size daubed in freely in splotches of red and gray. Dane was an etching in black and white, as vivid as a silhouette, as delicate as a drawing by Whistler. She was rather pleased with this comparison, and she felt a keener sense of life as she looked at his fine black head and alabaster profile outlined there beside Mac's great ruby face.

She turned amused eyes on Father Ryan's placid features.

"My old set ostracizes that man. Speaks of him with bated breath. But I don't feel contaminated by his presence. Do you?"

"Not in the least. He has never hurt anybody half as much as he is hurting himself."

"That's it, and I have no doubt that as a sinner he has been absurdly overrated. As a matter of fact this rubbish about sin, this idea of what can hurt one is one of the most ridiculous things that can be told to a thinking person. The real sins, the real corrodors of souls are overlooked. People are not ostracized for overeating, but from my point of view, if you're going to ostracize at all, they ought to be. They are not ostracized for prying into your personality, but they ought to be. They are not ostracized for whispering behind doors, but they ought to be. They are not ostracized for grumbling and nagging and opening other people's letters, but they ought to be. Those are the things I'm out to ostracize people for."

She glared at Father Ryan.

"You and I will not quarrel about that," he said simply.

"I don't suppose Mr. Barrington is a bit worse than my father," she said musingly.

This frankness surprised the priest, who had heard the current rumours of Davenport Carr.

"Well, I take men as I find them," he went on gently. "Mr. Barrington is a man of contradictions. But he is more at war with himself than anyone else need ever be with him. The man I would be afraid of would be the man who accepted himself without a fight, or the world without a fight."

"Ah," she patted his arm, her eyes flashing, "that's it. That's it."

"And he is a generous man, though he would not admit it. He gave me fifty pounds last week for a wretched family that has tuberculosis. And when he handed it to me he said, 'Ryan, this isn't Christianity, it's damned foolishness, and you know it as well as I do. If we had a grain of sense we'd have prevented those people being born, or once born we'd chloroform them. What the devil have they got to live for? This money will only feed their diseases. But you can have it on your conscience. I've enough on mine.'"

Valerie threw back her head and let out a peal of laughter that surprised the four men eating in the dining-room.

"That's Miss Carr, I suppose," said Dane to Mac, who nodded.

"Father Ryan must have been telling her a good joke," he added.

## II

Valerie had meant to play the piano that evening, but she felt self-conscious now with Dane in the hotel. She stood uncertainly in her room for some minutes. She had not changed for dinner, she seldom did, as she usually went back to the office. She wore a dark linen dress with a little white at the pointed neck. She solemnly surveyed



what she could see of herself in her mirror, and then she turned and went hatless down the side stairs and out to the river. The venom had now gone out of the heat, and the night was balmy and soft. She strolled along towards the centre of the town. At Queen Street she paused. She wondered if Dane Barrington were going back to the coast that night, and whether if she took that road she would meet him. She turned up a few yards, but then abruptly swung round and went on past the town wharf, the office, the railway wharf, and on towards the northern hills.

She had discovered four main roads leading out of Dargaville. One that she did not care for ran south along the Wairoa to Aratapu. The second was the camp road. The third went off across the flat in a northwesterly direction towards the forest and Kaihu, touching the railway here and there, and the fourth, the one she now explored, ran due north by the river.

About two miles from the town she came to a wooded point and saw the beginnings of a track trailing off into it. She could never resist a track, so she walked on through a bit of mixed bush that ended in a picturesque point and a rock projecting high over the water like a lookout. From it she got a fine view across the Wairoa of valleys filmed with indigo-tinted mist, and of bush-clad ranges outlined on the horizon like the coasts on a map with undulating layers of pigeon gray and rose fading off into a luminous opaline sky.

She threw herself down with delight at finding a retreat like this so near the town. As she sat, the little black steamer that ran between Dargaville and all wharves up to Tangiteroria came chugging down on the evening tide, and a small launch went racing by. She wished she could afford a boat. She wanted to go to the beginnings of the river in remote hills and lonely places. There was some-

thing fascinating about seeing a little trickle of water grow and grow till it could carry an ocean-going ship. She loved the places that rivers came from, the mangrove swamps they cut across, the lagoons they sneaked out of, the gullies they watered.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footsteps coming along the track. Before she could move a man slipped out of the bush, and in the dusk she saw his slight boyish figure above her and his white face framed in his soft black hair.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," he said quickly and resentfully, not seeing who it was, and thinking he had surprised a pair of lovers. Before she could speak he turned and was gone.

Valerie could not bring her mind back to the river and the birds. She began to think of Dane Barrington.

She was fifteen when she had first read an article by him in the *Sydney Bulletin*. That was ten years ago and since that time he had become the finest critical writer, and one of the best writers of stories and verse in the colonies, and was generally acknowledged to be the best all-round journalist in Australasia. He was an Australian, born in Sydney, and even before he achieved a reputation as a writer he had achieved one on his looks and fascination. Almost every well-known Sydney artist had painted him or drawn him. A black and white drawing of his head by Norman Lindsay had been the feature of one winter's exhibition, and had been reproduced in papers and magazines. As a girl of seventeen Valerie had come across a print of it and had cut it out and pasted it in a little book with heads of Byron and Shelley, and Keats and Napoleon and Cæsar, and other dramatic heroes of her adolescent passions. She still had that little book.

Then Dane Barrington had figured as co-respondent in a divorce case that rocked the city of Sydney and spread ripples of luscious scandal to the dinner-tables of New Zealand. Nothing but the bare announcement of the affair appeared in the press, and when he afterwards married the woman concerned the talk died down. Articles and verse from his pen appeared at intervals, and Valerie read everything he wrote with a strange feeling that he was writing for her. Then she heard at a dinner in her home one night that he had left Sydney and had come to live in New Zealand, at Christchurch. And there was a whisper that he and his wife did not get on. Because of his magnetic looks rumour could not let him alone. He was one of those men who accumulate publicity without any personal effort. Then again came the bare announcement in the press that his wife had divorced him and had returned to Australia. The name of the lady concerned this time was suppressed.

The colonies will stand one divorce, and if the details are not too unpleasant, will suspend judgment and give the parties a chance. But two divorces inside of four years strain their charity. And when not long afterwards Dane Barrington was blackballed out of the best club in Christchurch every door, save those of a few newspaper men, was closed to him. Nothing as to this final blow appeared in the press, so that lovers of scandal drew all the more upon the inexhaustible resources of their imagination. Dane Barrington himself would have been amazed to discover that the mere mention of his name conjured up in the breasts of the pure pictures of depravity that it would have taxed his own powers to depict.

Valerie had learned next that Dane had come up to Auckland and that her father had met him. For some time after that his name did not appear in print. But

Rumour knew all about him. He was drinking himself to death on the gumfields, that El Dorado of lost men.

Then after a year of silence his stories and articles and verse began to appear again as good as ever. One night a discussion of something he had written began among men sitting with her father after dinner, and the talk drifted to the man himself, and to the circumstances of his banishment, and she gathered that no one present believed the tales.

"Well, he was a damned fool not to fight it," she heard her father say. "There's no sense in being sensitive about things like that."

Most of her relatives, however, banned his name from general conversation, but they had long since taken the meaning out of language for Valerie. She herself had ceased to be a lady so often that it did not disturb her to hear a man had ceased to be a gentleman. She merely wondered what fine adventure he had been up to.

And then there was her own father. He had been the most illuminating experience in her life. It seemed funny to her that Dane Barrington should be an outcast while her father sat in the seats of the mighty. Of course he had been clever enough and wealthy enough to keep out of divorce cases.

And now this strange being who had been a kind of phantom flitting in and out of her dreams for years, was here somewhere, to be actually seen in the flesh, to be encountered unawares on the roads, to give a sense of adventure to an evening stroll.

Seeing his head as it had appeared for a moment against the dusk of the trees it was hard to think he was anything but a phantom, and if it had not been for the memory of his vibrant voice, that said "I beg your pardon" over and over again in her brain, she would have thought she

had seen a vision. She got up wondering why he had come that way. Had he walked from the town just to get the view from that point? In any case, he knew it and wanted something from it and he had been irritated to find an interloper there. She would have felt just the same. When she reached the road there was no sign of him. He had been swallowed up in the night.

### III

Valerie looked out of her window at the river the next morning and revolted swiftly and completely against the idea of work.

"I'll do it to-night," she said to herself.

"Lizzie, would it be possible for me to have a few sandwiches? I want to take my lunch and go off for a picnic. I could make them here at the table if I could have some cold meat." She looked up at the waitress with a half-humorous, half-pleading appeal, as if she knew she were asking an outrageous thing but could not help it.

"Why, I will make you some sandwiches, miss. It isn't a busy morning. There's some nice cold beef, and do you like tomato sauce on it?"

"Yes, I do. That's fine. And ask Michael to get me a bottle of ale."

She turned to Father Ryan.

"I'm going to play truant," she said gleefully, "and have a lovely day all to myself. I get awfully sick of people, don't you?"

"One needs a rest from them, I think, to restore one's forces."

"Well, it's more than that. I like myself."

"You have every reason to, I'm sure," he smiled gallantly.

"Oh, I don't mean to be conceited."

"No, no, I understand."

With her lunch and her ale and George Moore's Esther Waters tied up in a package, Valerie set off a little after ten o'clock. She had on a plain serge dress and a cloth hat, and carried a hooked stick. Beyond the station she had the world to herself, and as she walked she whistled and whisked the heads off the monkey grass. She went by the point she had discovered the night before, and a mile further on found herself climbing into hills. Presently she stopped at the top of a low range to look down upon an old house buried in trees on a point below her.

"Oh, how lovely," she said under her breath, with a quick lifting of her spirits, as if she had just caught a glimpse of the sea at the end of a long valley.

She could see only the red roof and two brick chimneys, from one of which a column of smoke rose lazily in the warm air. By the size of the pines and poplars that mingled with the native bush to make a wall about it she gathered that it had been built by an early settler. Anyway it had a charming old-world air like that of some deserted mission station. Removed from the house a little she saw patches of colour and fresh light greens that looked like vegetables, and across the road she saw in a clearing a cow and a horse.

She walked slowly down the dusty slope, breathing in the cool of the heavy bush on either side, till she came to an old post and rail fence buried in great geranium bushes and old briars and moss roses, that honeyed the air with the sweetness of their leaves. *Convolvulus* crept about everywhere, and stretches of *periwinkle* formed a carpet back into the trees. But she could see no sign of the house. It was barricaded from view many times over by shrubs and bush and pines. Set back in the hedge

she came upon a moss-covered wooden gate, and for a moment the glory of the place was spoiled for her by the menacing notice that was nailed to it: "No Admittance. Beware of the Dogs."

The neglected driveway inside turned and twisted among the trees, but in spite of that inhospitable warning the whole place had a seductive air of peace. Fantails fluttered about it unafraid of the invisible dogs, and a million bees thrived among the mingled scents. Wood pigeons flew over her head, and as she stood still a cock pheasant nervously trailed his beauty across the road a little way off.

Regretfully Valerie moved on, wondering who on earth lived there. Coming to a track leading towards the river she followed it, and found herself on a point the next beyond that on which the old house stood. She could see nothing of it even from here, but she could see the steps cut down the rocky face to a little landing where a small boat was tied outside a boathouse. Between the two points the river widened in an arc-shaped bay, rock-bound and overhung by lovely mixed bush. The water in it was clearer than that of the main stream and it was very still and cool. She investigated her own point, found a hollow where she could lean back, and for some time mooned in a peaceful sensuousness listening to birds and the wash of the tide, and staring up through the green elegance of a titoki at clouds that dissolved into puffs and melted away in the vivid blue.

Her dreaming was disturbed by the sound of a launch. She listened, envying the person who was racing down the river. As the sound grew sharp she stood up and looked over the top of a bush. Then seeing that the boat was heading straight for her point she ducked quickly, and peered out cautiously as it went by into the little bay.

It was a white launch of fine lines, with a broad band of scarlet round it just below the gunwale. She could make out the name Diana near the bow. There was only one person in it and she recognized him immediately, despite the fact that his dark head was almost hidden under a slouch hat.

Very much alive now, she watched him make for the boathouse. Half-way across the little bay he turned his head suddenly, looking straight where she crouched. She ducked again, hoping he had not seen her. She saw him run the launch into the shed, shut the doors, go up the steps and vanish in the trees. She wondered if anyone lived there with him. She wondered if he were now back from the coast for good. She wondered if it was from this peaceful place that he had been for the past year sending out the fine stories of lost men that had been among the best things he had ever done.

As she speculated she raised her head, listening. Before she could get to her feet the figure of a Chinese boy cleared the bushes. She stared at him in amazement for a second. Then she remembered that one of the things accounted to Dane Barrington for a suspiciously excessive love of luxury was the fact that he kept Chinese servants.

"Please, miss, you trespass," said the boy, bowing low.

"Trespass," she repeated quickly getting to her feet.

"Yes, miss. You please to go away."

Just for a minute she was furious, and the boy's eyes fell before hers.

"Whose land is this?" she unnecessarily demanded.

"It is Meester Barrington, miss."

"Did he send you?"

"Yes, miss."

Her eyes gleamed. "All right. You give Mr. Barrington



ton a message from me. My name is Valerie Carr. You hear it? Valerie Carr. Tell him that, and tell him I think he is the meanest man I ever heard of, the meanest man. You say that."

The boy's impassive face was raised to hers.

"He not like the people who make a picnic, miss," he said gravely.

"I understand, but you tell him what I said."

She took up her things and followed him out to the road.

"How far does his land go?" she asked.

"There, to that big tree, miss," he pointed.

"I see. Be sure you tell him what I said, and my name, Valerie Carr," and she walked on.

She was not angry now. She was amused and excited. If the boy gave Dane her message she knew that he would be bound to tender her some kind of apology. She wandered on wondering if he would and how he would do it. Then she resettled herself on the bank of the river a mile further on, and tried to forget the incident. But it kept intruding itself upon the pages of Esther Waters and upon her rambling thoughts. The only time she was really oblivious of it was when for two hours she lay asleep.

Later in the afternoon she crossed the road and climbed a hill by a rough track. There was a fine view from the top, and she ate her remaining sandwiches and stayed there till the sun dropped out of sight behind her. It was dusk when she reached Dane Barrington's retreat. She lingered along by the old buried fence listening for sounds from within. She wondered again if anybody but his servants lived there with him. She craved to go in, defying the notice at the gate. She thought it the most seductive place she had ever found beside a lonely road.

It was seven when she reached the *News* office with three

or four hours' work ahead of her. Reluctantly she went in, drank a long draught of water to wake her up, and settled down to her evening's work.

## IV

When Dane Barrington entered his house from the launch that morning he struck a little gong.

"Lee," he said to the Chinese boy who appeared instantly in the hall doorway, "there are some people picnicking on my point. Go and tell them they are trespassing, and that they have to clear out. God damn them, there are plenty of places for them to go to."

He turned back through a French door to a broad verandah, that ran most of the way round the house. On this side, that nearest the river, it was furnished in two sections for living and sleeping with a bare space between, where steps came up from the path. The sleeping end was at the front against the side wall of a large study. It was screened on two sides by heavy canvas curtains now drawn up almost to the roof. Besides the cot there was a plain table littered with books and magazines and an Italian stool upholstered in worn red tapestry. An Indian rug, much worn, in shades of red and blue covered the floor for the length of the bed. Opposite the steps and making with them a passage between the sections was a French door opening into the room beyond.

The living end was comfortably furnished with a specially made wide hammock of white canvas, two low chairs upholstered in dull red rep, a footstool covered with the same material, a couple of old carved English chests, a solid mahogany reading table with a pile of books on it, and a beautiful small table of vermilion lacquer decorated with black dragons. The hammock was loaded with red

silk cushions, and a fine possum rug lined with dull red cloth was doubled across the foot of it. Another such rug lay on one of the chests. The small table had on it a fine Chinese enamel jar used for tobacco, a cigarette box of bronze, and a tortoise-shell cigarette case inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The two floor rugs were, like the one by the bed, of old Indian work, with faded flowers trailing along a strong red ground. The predominance of this colour everywhere warmed up the gray unpainted floor and the weather-beaten walls. From this section of the verandah three French doors opened into one large room with the windows at present shaded by silk curtains, the colour of burnished copper.

Dane leaned down to caress two Airedale terriers that stood looking expectantly up at him. Then he told them to lie down. They watched him as he got into the hammock with the grace of a woman, and then they settled obediently on the floor underneath him. Dane drew beside him the scarlet table, lit a cigarette, searched among the cushions for a book, a volume of plays by Chekov which he had left there, and finding it, fixed the pillows at a comfortable height and began to read.

After a short time Lee rose up beside him like a mushroom.

"What is it?" There was a trace of irritation in his voice.

"The lady tell me to give you a message, Meester Barrington."

"Lady? What lady?"

"The lady who trespass."

"Oh well, what? Was it only one lady?"

"Yes, sir. And she very angry. She say to tell you she is Valerie Carr. She say it many times and she say ——"

"Oh damnation! Confound it! Well, what else did she say?"

"She say ——"

"Go on, Lee. Don't be afraid. I'm not going to blame you for what she said."

"She say you the meanest man she ever know. She tell me tell you that."

Dane laughed suddenly. "She did, did she? Good for her. Which way did she go?"

"Along the road, that way," he pointed.

"All right, thanks, Lee."

The boy glided into the house.

Dane lay indecisively for a few minutes. Then with a wriggle of impatience he dragged himself out of the hammock, slouched off the verandah waving back his dogs, and went round the house and down his grass-grown drive to the road. He went on past his boundary expecting that Valerie would have turned in at the next attractive point on the river. He explored it, but found no trace of her. He stood where there was a long stretch of road visible but she was nowhere to be seen. He walked another quarter of a mile, and finding no sign of her he turned crossly back, angry at her now for disturbing his morning.

At nine that night, intent on her books in the silent office, Valerie heard steps pause on the clay sidewalk outside. Then she heard the door open without a knock. She wondered if Bob had got back sooner than he expected. She swung round in her chair to see Dane Barrington moving round the corner of the counter. He was without a hat and as she looked up at him her eyes were arrested by the glitter of the gaslight for a second on the eyes of a green snake curved over the top of a black stick he carried. She almost thought the thing alive.

He stood easily before her for a little before he spoke.

"You are Valerie Carr?" he began unceremoniously.

"I am," but the glint of amusement faded quickly from her eyes, and without knowing why, she got to her feet and faced him.

He went on at once with a cool detached manner that she felt was assumed.

"I didn't know it was you I was turning off my land this morning. The last person in the world I should wish to be inhospitable to would be a daughter of Dave Carr. But I do detest picnickers messing up my place."

Valerie found her tongue. "I wouldn't have messed up anything," she retorted. "There's no person on earth who has more respect for a beautiful spot than I have!"

"Well, how could I know that?" His brilliant eyes glared at her. "And anyway, my dear girl, surely a man has a right to one spot on this earth where he can feel himself alone, really alone."

"I grant you that right," she cut in curtly, aggrieved at his manner. "I assure you your aloofness is in no danger from me. I didn't know it was your place."

Then she saw instantly that he misunderstood her, that something in her tone had lashed that extraordinary entity that was staring at her out of those wonderful eyes. She had seen the black lashes quiver.

"Oh please," she cried spontaneously, "I didn't mean that. I mean ——" she stopped confused. They looked at one another for a moment of silence.

She almost forgot she was looking at a man, and stared as if she were looking at a picture. She saw a perfect oval face of arresting whiteness a little tanned by the sun, a face shot through all its sensitiveness with elusive pain. But the features, chiselled with the beauty of an old cameo, had as yet no sign of looseness about them. They were straight, mobile, but firm. He had a lovely mouth, with

no trace of dissipation upon the fine lips which curved ever so delicately at the ends with a whimsical little twist. It was a face that any loss of weight would have made thin, but as she saw it it needed nothing to give it perfection of proportion. She was only conscious of all this as a setting for his eyes. It was they that held and abashed her. They lit from within his whole glamorous presence. They spread the troubled questioning and nervous discontent about his features. They suggested quests, adventures, battles, defeats, despairs. In the poor gaslight they seemed to be absolutely black and she could not tell what colour was in them.

She recovered herself and went on. "I put that badly. What I meant to say was that I never encroach on people's peace. I care too much for my own."

He did not take his eyes off her as she spoke. He was rather astonished that she had sensed him so quickly, and still more astonished at her blundering apology. It was unexpectedly human.

"I understand you, thank you," he said quietly. His glance fell on Esther Waters lying on the top of a fat ledger. He looked back at her.

"Was it you who were out on the point by the river last night?"

"Yes. Is that your land too?"

At the change in her tone his face melted into a slow smile that created a responsive one on hers.

"No, Miss Carr. And you may come out to that point of mine whenever you want to. But for God's sake don't bring anyone with you or tell anyone you come. Good-night."

Before she could think of an answer he was gone round the counter and she heard the door close.

He left an extraordinary blank behind him. It seemed

to Valerie that he had sucked something out of her. She stood uncertainly a moment. Then she closed the door into the composing-room for no reason except that she had to do something to sharpen her consciousness again. Then she sat down in her chair and deliberately pieced him together as he had stood in front of her. He was little more than two inches taller than herself, slightly but well made, and she judged him to be about thirty-six years old. In spite of his unusual appearance she had seen nothing of the poseur in his manner. Indeed she had been surprised by a certain simplicity, an unconsciousness of himself. And he had not thrust forth any tentacles at her. Bob had jeered at his mode of dressing, but he was simply carrying the easy and conventional clothes of the artist into the camp of the Philistines, as the Philistines carried their clothes into the haunts of the artist. If he had a beautiful throat Valerie saw no reason why he should not wear low soft collars and open shirts. If he liked colour she saw no reason why he should not wear a vivid tie, provided that his manner did not proclaim it, and his did not. She had liked the cut of his navy serge suit, and the freshness of his white silk shirt and the comfort of his canvas shoes. He knew how to combine fastidiousness and finish with colour and ease. Beside him Bob looked like a bull beside a deer.

She remembered that she had heard him called effeminate, but nothing effeminate had looked at her out of those eyes of his, nor was there anything unmasculine about his voice.

It was half an hour before she could get her thoughts back on working up Bob's notes of the county council meeting of the afternoon before. She didn't seem to care how many tons of stone were put on the road between Aratapu and Dargaville before the winter came, or whether Princess Street was ever shelled again or not.

## CHAPTER V

### I

ONE evening in the middle of March, as Dane lay smoking in his hammock immediately after his dinner, the dogs which were chained on the other side of the house set up a ferocious yelp, and almost simultaneously Lee stood in the nearest doorway.

"Mr. Benton coming in," he said.

"All right. I'll see him."

Dane did not move as Roger came with his spurs clinking round to that side of the house.

"Hello!" he said as his visitor came to the steps.

"Hello, Barrington, are you sociable this evening?"

"Yes, really pleased to see you. Did they get away from the coast yesterday?"

"Yes, everybody has gone and you have it to yourself now."

"Good. Sit down. Have you had dinner?"

"Yes, at Hill's, as I came along. I've got to look in at the railway men's meeting to-night, but there's plenty of time." Roger sat down where he could see his host's face.

Lee came through the doorway with a tray and bottles and glasses.

"Wine or whisky, Meester Benton?" he asked.

"Whisky, thank you."

"Meester Barrington, what for you?"

"Wine, please."

The boy poured out the drinks, saw that the smoking apparatus was complete, and disappeared.

Roger Benton took out his pipe and filled it. "I'm



glad the summer is nearly over," he said. "I don't mind the heat. But we have had so little rain this summer. That's so bad for the stock."

"Yes, why the deuce don't you manage better than to let your animals die? The sight of dead cows floating down this river makes me sick. I bumped into one the other day. Couldn't get that poor brute's eyes out of my mind."

"Well, we don't see 'em die for fun, Barrington. It's impossible to watch them all the time, and the damned things will walk into the river to get cool, and then down they go in the mud and drown before anyone can get to them."

"What a pathetic tragedy," said Dane, drinking down the last of his wine. "How are you getting on?" he asked after a silence. "Have you formed a committee yet?"

"No."

Dane turned lazily on his cushions. "You ought to hurry up with that, Benton. And drill them in the history of the Opposition. You've got to talk Massey, you know, as well as yourself. And Mobray has a pretty intelligent group going already."

"I know. I will hurry up. I'm going to do it this week. I wish you'd come on the committee."

"Good God!" Dane laughed suddenly, seeing this was what Roger had come in to ask. "That wouldn't do you any good, my friend. The world hasn't your easy tolerance. No, thanks, I won't go on your committee. But I'll help you all I can."

He looked out through a clearing he had cut through his trees to the river. It put into a leafy frame a picture that varied with every day. In the foreground there was a little bit of river and then the stretch of a long valley,

at the end of which the sun rose and the moon rose. He saw the silver arc now upon the horizon with the shapes of trees etched in vivid black across it.

"The men like you," persisted Roger, "the fellows around the mills and the camps. They are the chaps I'm afraid of."

"My dear chap, my singing to them occasionally won't affect their politics. But you get your committee going as soon as you can. And make George Rhodes chairman of it. He's the most intelligent of that lot in Dargaville."

"Yes, I will." Roger stretched out his legs. "I envy you, Barrington."

"Do you?"

"Yes. Really I do. You have no ties. You don't have to be respectable. You don't care what men say about you."

"Don't I?"

"Well, you don't show it."

"What men don't show, my naïve friend, is often the most vital thing about them." Dane took another cigarette and lit it at the one he had just finished. He turned a little and readjusted his cushions. Then he looked quizzically at Roger. Besides Doctor Steele he was the only man he had asked to come to this place. He would never forget that Roger had called upon him at Mac's hotel before he had been there a week and had invited him out to his sheep run. He had not accepted the invitation, but he had accepted the spirit of it. Dane liked Roger. He was like a blanket on a cold day. He appeared to enjoy life. And there was something about his big loose body, his strong limbs, that gave physical comfort to the other man with his nervous organism and his much too ready weariness.

"It must be an awful bore to have a public job," said

Dane after a while. "The last thing on earth I should want would be to run for Parliament. What on earth do you see in it?"

"Oh, I'll like it well enough if I get in, but I don't like the bother of getting there."

"Yes, it pleases your vanity and that of your wife. You fool yourself into thinking you can do more for the district than any other man because your friends have told you so, and your wife is dying to go to Wellington every winter and cut a dash, and you like the idea of dining with the Governor—all that." He waved a hand contemptuously.

Roger would have been annoyed at anyone else who put it this way. "You are right," he said amiably. "Well, I'm not in, and a man who has been in fifteen years will take some beating. But it's the general swing in the country from Ward to Massey that I'm reckoning on."

"Yes, the old Liberal Party has had a long innings; eighteen years or so, isn't it, since Dick Seddon jumped into the lead, and there was someone before him, wasn't there?"

"I forget just now."

Dane thought he was the most casual candidate he had ever met.

Night was now settling down on the river and the garden. Lee and his brother San, who was cook, came into the big room beside them, drew back the curtains, and lit two lamps that cast bands of light across the verandah and created mysterious shades beyond the trunks of the trees outside. Then they went into the other room and it came to light also.

"You like some music?" asked Lee from the doorway nearest the sleeping cot.

"Care for the victrola, Benton? I got one out recently. It amuses the boys."

"Why, yes, I'd like it."

Dane nodded at Lee.

## II

Roger turned in his chair a little so that he could look into the room with the three doors. He had never been asked into it, nor, indeed, into the house since his host had reconstructed it. As Valerie had thought, it had been built by an early missionary, and no less a person than Bishop Selwyn had once lived there. It amused Benton to think that the same walls should have housed two such dissimilar men, for Roger had supposed many of the rumours about Dane were true, even while he remained tolerant to the man.

The house had been constructed with some taste, for the studs were high, the ceilings of the main rooms beamed, and the brick fireplaces large. Dane had replaced the old wall paper with linings of oiled rimu. The room with the three doors had originally been two, but he had taken out the partition to make it spacious enough to house most of the Oriental things he had picked up when travelling in the East.

Roger had heard Davenport Carr say that Dane Barington's Indian rugs and Chinese things were so valuable that he had willed them to the Sydney Museum, but this did not impress him so much as did the suggestion of silken rakishness that he got through the curtained slits of those tantalizing doors. He had once managed to sit opposite one of them long enough to have his senses tickled by the riot of gold and vermillion and wondrous blues and greens that lit the room and the walls.

The place was indeed something of a treasure house for a good deal of the Chinese porcelain, the nephrite and jadeite brush pots and jars and ornaments, some of the ivories, three carved boxes of Peking lacquer, many of the bronze incense burners and covered jars, an enamel box inlaid with jewels, and a wonderful little bottle of lapis lazuli had come from the loot of the Summer Palace at the suppression of the Boxer rebellion, and by devious ways had found themselves in the hands of Dane's father. He had, besides, a varied collection of less valuable but beautiful vases and jars of apple green and powdered blue and red porcelain, a collection of small things carved out of the hard stones, some fine bits of Foochou lacquer, and a marvellous carved box of rock crystal in which he kept cigarettes. These things stood on lacquered tables and cabinets, and the most valuable were locked in one behind glass. He had two large screens, one old Chinese in black and gold and the other Japanese in red and black. The three lamps in the room were oil set in red porcelain jars and had shades made of gay silks. A nest of scarlet lacquer tables, of which the one on the verandah was part, stood between two of the doors.

There were no pictures on the walls which were hung with Indian silks and rugs, and the floor was covered by one large and very valuable one in the prevailing colour. To tone this down the deep lounge set directly in front of the brick hearth and the two modern upholstered chairs were done in black silk, but their sombreness was in turn vivified by numerous brilliant cushions. At one end of the lounge there stood a fire-screen of fine black lacquer ornamented with mother-of-pearl.

This was the kind of thing that looked mysteriously wicked to people brought up on the Victorian antimacassar, wool work, and the ænemic proportions of spidery

furniture or the severity of mission art. Roger was not at all sure of it himself; it wasn't the kind of thing he would go in for, and yet it stirred him pleasantly. He supposed it was only because it was on the banks of the Wairoa that it took on the significance it did. Of course he had told his wife all about it, and it was too good a glimpse of sin to be kept in the family. All Dargaville knew that Dane lounged about like a woman on gorgeous cushions, and that his rooms were filled with colour and scent. The pioneer spirit, conveniently recent enough to be quoted, was offended.

### III

The two men listened in silence to records by Harry Lauder and Melba and Caruso. But Roger was not fond of music. After a while as he refilled his pipe he turned to his host.

"Have you seen Miss Carr yet?" he asked.

"Yes, turned her off my land one day."

"What!"

Dane raised his face a little, peering at Roger, who was blurred against the wall out of the line of any light.

"Fact. But I did not know till afterwards that it was she. Then I went to the office and apologized."

"Oh, you did?"

"Why, of course. I wouldn't willingly be a beast to the daughter of Dave Carr, or to anybody else's daughter, for that matter."

"She's a character."

"Is she?"

"What did you think of her?"

"Why, nothing. I noticed she had fine defiant eyes

and a lot of hair. Are you getting sentimental about her?"

Roger stretched out his legs. "I might, if she'd let me," he said.

Dane assumed an air of solemnity. "Look here, old chap. None of that. You've got to be a moral husband and father, a pillar of society. The eye of the world is on you, Roger. And then there's Lorrimer, isn't there? And he has a belligerent set of shoulders. Not that that ever made any difference to a determined man."

"They don't act as if they were engaged."

"That's nothing. You never know what is between any man or woman."

"I wonder why she came up here?"

"How should I know, my dear Roger? Is she any good on the paper?"

"By Jove, yes, she is."

"Well, it is a well-edited little sheet, I can tell you that, and they're improving the make-up every day, and they've got life into it, whichever of them is doing it. By the way, I seem to remember some tale about her, an adventure, running away from home or something like that, years ago, in a boat, with some boy."

"Yes, she did, and Lorrimer was the boy. My wife was staying in Auckland at the time, and heard the story. It was ten years ago. I forget the details now. They did go in a boat, and I believe it was a week before they were found. And she looks now as if she'd just run away with anybody any minute. She's the most independent girl—the women don't like her. She won't go to see anybody. She's refused all invitations to dinner. What can you do with a girl like that?"

"Good Lord! Why try to do anything? Let her

alone." Dane, who had lain for some minutes without smoking, lit himself another cigarette.

"Women are a pest," went on Roger, with an air of profundity that amused his host.

"Then keep away from them."

"Well, I can't. I like them, I like their company."

"H'm! That's the one thing about them I like least. They don't understand company. They ruin it and love and scenery and music, and everything worth having, with their infernal chatter. It's an eternal mystery to me that men don't strangle women in the night. I sigh for the good old days when they did it. The best women could ever do for me was to give me physical rest, and God knows I have wanted a lot more than that from them. And they don't even understand sense. They do understand suggestion and stimulation, but they fall short when it comes to satisfying what they have aroused. And they can't make a fine art of love. They can only be sentimental or sacrificial about it, and eternally remind you afterwards that they have given you everything. They have no honour in love." He stopped abruptly. He had surprised Roger by this outburst.

"I guess you are harder to please than I am," he said.

Caruso's voice, vibrant with the passion of an Italian love song, rang out from the room further down and was smothered in the heavy silence of the garden. Dane threw one hand across his face. He did not want to talk any more. Roger sat till another record was played then he stood up.

"I must be getting along, Barrington."

Dane roused himself and swung out of his hammock. Stretching himself, he looked up at the soft stars.

"God! What a lovely night! You will have a fine ride," he said.



They went round the house along the drive to the rather dilapidated stables outside of which Roger had tied his horse. It was a beautiful animal that whinnied and pawed the ground as they came up to it. The moon, coming up over the pines, caught its quivering muscles and put a sheen on them. Dane drew down its impatient head and rubbed his cheek against the satin of its sensitive skin. It nosed him back in a friendly fashion. Then he looked up admiringly at Roger, who swung easily into the saddle, and who was a superb figure on his big horse. Dane walked along by him to open the gate.

"I'll go down to the tent in a day or two," he said. "I may stay down there while the weather's good."

"All right. Good-night."

"So long, old man. See you soon. Don't forget about your committee."

"No fear." And in a moment Roger's horse was leaping for Dargaville.

Dane lingered by his gate, staring into the forest that rose steeply between him and the western sky. It was virgin bush, practically untouched, with Kauri saplings further up sending slim pointers impertinently at the very stars. His one grievance against this range was that it shut him off from the sunsets. He had always dreamed of a place where he could lie in a hammock and see the sun come up on one side of him and go down on the other. But it seemed that that was one of the impossible things he had clamoured for.

He thought of Roger as he walked back, and was amused to think that he had been attracted by Valerie Carr. And yet there was nothing unusual about it. He got a picture of Valerie as she had risen out of her chair in the office to face him. He had not thought of her since, even though at the time he had felt her charging vitality.

He was still suffering too much from his treatment at the hands of women to be easily rid of the exceeding bitterness he felt when he thought of them.

His dogs leapt at him from their kennels beside the path. He caressed them, and unchained them, and played his way with them back to the other side of the house. Then he began to pace back and forth on the path, stopping every now and again to look up at the trees patterned against the moonlit sky, or to peep through his cutting at the dull sheen on the river.

As he went up the steps some time later he felt something crunch under his feet, and with a little shudder stooped to see what he had done. Making a face, he scraped the unpleasant thing out of sight with his shoe. Then he grieved because he had crushed the life out of an insignificant insect, and took a moment to wonder what pathetic domestic tragedy in the history of beetles would result from his inadvertent clumsiness.

## CHAPTER VI

### I

**Y**OU know, Val, I do think we ought to go just once to the Bentons' for a Sunday. It does seem so dashed uncivil not to."

This came out unexpectedly as Valerie and Bob sat in the office about half-past eight. She waited a few seconds before replying. Her eyes had hardened.

"Good heavens, Bob, do I have to decide for you whether you go or not? I've decided for myself and told you my decision. If you can't make up your mind what you want to do, I do not see why you should bother me with it."

Bob took a long puff at his pipe. It annoyed him that Valerie was the one person he could do nothing with. And it annoyed him that some devil in him continually prompted him to try to change her. The fact that irritation and friction resulted did not deter him from beginning it all over again.

"Well, I can't see why you don't want to go," he snapped.

"Then you'll have to go on living without seeing, Bob. Do you know you are getting more like the relatives every day? Yes you are," she repeated, as he squirmed in his chair. "You promised if I came up here that you would treat me as if I were a man and an independent stranger. And you have done nothing of the kind. I feel your criticism every day. You were mad when I ordered ale for my lunch. You were mad when I walked past the barroom

door and you heard some harmless creature inside enquire who I was, as if that could hurt me. You were mad when you heard that I played to a party of sailors. You are mad because I'm talked about. I've always been talked about, and I always will be, not that I get up in the morning meaning to be, but it seems to happen. Now I won't go to the Bentons' because I want rest on my Sundays. And if, after seeing me all the week, you still want to see me on a Sunday, all I can say is you're a glutton. If I hadn't tried to regulate this friendship of ours you'd have killed it years ago. You men are all alike. You want to swallow a woman whole, and then you wonder why you get sex indigestion."

"You'll live to be knocked down yet," he retorted, annoyed that he could never get the best of her.

"I wonder why that thought seems to give such pleasure to a large proportion of the human race?" she said meditatively. "It doesn't thrill me to think that anyone who differs from me will get a crack on the skull. That's just like the relatives, Bob. They used to curl their tongues with joy round the things fate had in store for me."

"Look here," he groaned, "if you compare me with those damned relatives again——"

"Then don't be like them, dear Bob."

He turned back to his desk. "I say, have you any more to do here?"

"A little."

"Well, I don't care, clear out. I've got to write this leader."

She made a face at him, kissed the top of his head, took her things and went out. As she walked towards the centre of the town she stopped once and drove her right heel into the clay path as if she were crushing a centipede.

"My God," she thought, "if I ever make any claims on any human soul may I be struck dead."

And a man coming up to her looked curiously at her, wondering why she had twisted round in the path like that.

## II

When Valerie came to Queen Street she paused. She could just hear the heavy roll of the waves on the coast. She considered that it could not be much after nine and that she could walk to the gully and back with time to spare before the hotel closed at midnight. She knew the cottagers had returned three days before, and that she would have the road to herself. Few people from the town ever walked up there on the flat. The moon was nearing the full, and she knew it would be wonderful out there by the sea.

Sounds of voices and laughter floated out as she passed Ray Bolton's house. They were playing bridge in there. She paused a moment to listen. The windows were open and the light streamed out through the lath blinds that screened the verandah. She could hear Mrs. Harris's high laugh, that indiscriminating laugh that took the flavour out of everything. She could imagine the chatter round those tables, the punctilious behaviour as a thin veneer over brittle tempers and personal predilections. What she detested most about these people was that they were poor copies of other imitations, all straining their imaginations in the process of worshipping the "correct thing." She wondered if little Mrs. Rhodes was there struggling to keep her personality intact in that circle, a victim of her husband's position.

Ten minutes after she had left the town behind her she had forgotten it. She drew in long breaths of the rising

breeze that wailed about the bushes with a vague threat of rain. Clouds crept up from the west and blotted out the moon and uncovered it again as they drifted on. She felt extraordinarily free and happy.

When she got to the top of the ravine she dropped down upon the edge of it between bits of stunted ti-tree. Down below her she could see the moon whitening the line of surf.

The breeze was fresh here and the sea was rising. She was lost in a rambling wonder at the miracle of space above her when she heard steps on the road. In her dark dress she was almost invisible in the shadow, and could have stayed unobserved, but instinctively she jumped to her feet, and startled a man who stopped suddenly not more than a yard away from her.

"What the devil—oh, I beg your pardon. Good Lord, Miss Carr, do you jump down from the stars in a parachute, or what?"

Valerie struggled against the instantaneous effect that Dane had on her. "I thought everybody had gone from here," she said lamely, as if she had to account for her presence. And then she was vexed that she seemed to be apologizing for herself. It was so unlike her.

"The cottagers have gone, thank God. But I don't regulate my life by them."

"I should hope you didn't," she said with emphasis.

She saw now that he was stooping under the weight of a large knapsack strapped to his back. He held his smoking pipe in one hand and his snake stick in the other. His head was vividly black and white against the sheen of the moon, and the wind stirred in his soft hair.

As he saw her with the moon full upon her face he caught again that sense of abundant life he had got from her before, and a sense of bodily poise and pliancy from her easy limbs.

"You are alone?" he said, dropping his voice into a richer and wondering tone.

"And why shouldn't I be?"

He detected the belligerency, good-humoured though it was, of the person frequently on the defensive against criticism.

"Well, it is unusual to find a woman who is sane enough to be alone, and on such good terms with the night that she will wander about with it. But you must be very lonely, Miss Carr."

This simple directness amazed Valerie. She did not know what she had expected him to be, but he was saying things that struck her as astonishingly unusual. Or perhaps it was that his glamorous personality infused ordinary syllables with an extraordinary force.

"I don't know," she said slowly. "I have always been happiest alone."

He instantly raised the hand that held his pipe to a salute. "I won't disturb your dreams," he said softly. "Good-night," and moved on.

"Oh, I didn't mean you to go like that," she exclaimed spontaneously.

But he waved his hand at her and did not stop. She stood still looking after him till he had disappeared, and he knew, with a funny vague premonition, that she did.

She thought of him all the way home. She compared him again with her father. Davenport Carr had been born into the Brahmin caste, and Dane Barrington into the artist. Though Dane's marriage and his looks had projected him into the other for a while, Valerie doubted if in spirit he had ever belonged there. Her father had talked of his fascination as a dinner host, had excused his informal dress, had called him a special case, always with the implication that he was a privileged outsider. It had

always amused her to hear the outsiders discussed by the elect. She learned as she grew up that there were a multiplicity of elects each with its own group of outsiders. She was amused at the queer game played by those "outside" who wanted to "get in." She had heard the most solemn conversations on the subject. She had never been able to take seriously the enormous importance of the "ins" over the "outs," because the importance seemed to her to be such a frail bubble, and one so easily pricked. And why did anybody ever want to get "in"? Why not stay "out"? Why not make your own "elect," if you had to have an "elect"?

She had listened to her mother making out dinner lists. That well-intentioned but sadly unintelligent parent never dreamed that her terrible child was formulating a philosophy about the elect out of so simple a thing as a dinner list. And when Dane Barrington had been crossed off the dinner lists of the country Valerie had wondered if he was foolish enough to think he would lose by it.

And now she felt, without knowing any more of him than the pictures of his beautiful old place by the river and of the tent snuggled in the sand-hills, that this man had learned there were things he could well do without. And it seemed to her that the cleverest thing in the game of life, as in bridge, was to know what you could discard.

She felt now with a lift of her spirits that she would get to know him. The place was too small to keep apart two people who wandered about in the night. She was rather afraid of him mentally. He was brilliant in a profession where she had little more than dreamed her way, and even in their two brief encounters she had felt a cool mental poise balanced against her impetuous dogmatism. She knew she was crude beside him. But she was no depreciator of herself. She had never met a man her personality



could not affect if she chose. But she was not planning any onslaught on the peace that Dane had made for himself. Her thoughts did not run on into any sentimental future. All she thought was that it would be nice to have him to talk to sometimes, perhaps to ride with, while she stayed in Dargaville.

### III

The next Saturday evening Dane Barrington wandered back and forth on the beach beside the surf, so near it that he had to dodge unexpectedly encroaching runs of frothy water. He wore a rough tweed suit without a vest, as the air had been chilled a little by heavy rain the night before, but he was hatless as usual, and his low collar was loosely held by a dull red tie.

His mind was clouded by one of the moods of boredom and loneliness that he could so seldom fight off, and he was playing with the impulse to go up to Mac's. He cursed himself that he could never go light-heartedly now in the matter of folly. Many men he knew, Davenport Carr, for instance, could drift into a night of drinking with gaiety, and did not have to pay afterwards the price he did. What a wretched creature man was with a body that was never equal to his imagination. There were physical limits to his capacity for eating, drinking and forgetting; physical limits to his capacity for love. And, worse still, there was that awful mental limitation, satiety.

He reflected that it was pitiful that he did not know what to do with himself in this mood. He could get just so far in fighting it and then everything went smash in his brain. He turned off the beach, walking towards his tent.

Rounding a hillock and mounted on a bay horse, Valerie nearly ran over him.

As she had hoped she would meet him she was prepared to some extent. She pulled up suddenly. But she misunderstood the first look in his upturned eyes.

"I'm sorry to seem to get in your way, but as you get in mine you will have to get used to the sight of me." Safe up on her horse, gathering something from the life and magnetism of him, she felt snippy.

As he looked up at her something in her flushed and glowing face, in her exuberant health, in the way her uncovered head was set on her shoulders, with her hair in two long plaits hanging down her back, brought light back into his mind. And at her words the light flashing into his mind diffused itself over his face.

"Oh, Miss Carr, I wish ——" he began impulsively and stopped, remembering unpleasant things.

"Yes?" She stared down expectantly, surprised by his manner.

"Oh, it wasn't anything." He looked away from her, making a hopeless gesture with his shoulders.

To his astonishment, before he could move, she vaulted off her horse and stood before him. "Please finish that sentence," she commanded.

She was surprised to see that he looked at her quite helplessly.

"You were going to ask me to do something for you. What was it?" More than her words her youth and her own particular glamour spoke for her.

"Why, how did you know that?" Some of the pain had gone from his eyes.

"When a person has a face as expressive as yours, well ——" She waved her hands. "I know what is the matter with you. The goblins have got you. Now what do you want me to do?"

She felt a quick sense of triumph as she saw the smile

gather at the back of his eyes. She had spoken with the pert ease of a spoiled child, and it had amused him and surprised him into the simple truth.

"You're right. I am blue. I was going to ask if you would let me ride on the beach with you. I have my horse down here in Benton's stable."

Her eyes widened and she felt very warm inside. "May I ask why you hesitated at first?"

"Well, it would take a long time to tell. Hesitations have a complicated background."

"That may be. But I want you to understand something this minute. You don't have to hesitate about asking me anything. I don't run my life on hesitations. I'd have you know I'm a free spirit."

Her head went up as she said it, and he thought he had never seen a more ravishing picture of youthful defiance, and absurd self-assurance.

"I salute you, Miss Freedom," he said with a charming gesture.

He stood poised before her in the sand with his head a little to one side. The despair had gone out of his eyes over which a whimsical questioning now flitted, and she could see in the fading light that they seemed to be blue. But they were the most baffling eyes she had ever seen. She knew there was a great deal going on behind them, and she wondered if she would ever know even a fraction of what it was. She wondered what they would look like when he put love into them, for they were wonderful even when they were lit with polite interest.

"You don't believe me," she went on pertly.

"Well, let's postpone a discussion of freedom. I take it that I may ride with you?"

"You certainly may."

"Shall I help you up?"

"Help me up!"

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Independence. Have you no weaknesses?" And again a slow smile crept out of his eyes and rippled about his features like a wavelet on a pool.

"You can find out," she retorted, vaulting into her saddle, and looking down at him.

"Will you wait on the beach? I won't be five minutes."

She was a little disappointed that he had not asked her to the tent. She was excited as she rode on, and told herself not to assume a manner that really did not belong to her. She was not at ease with him yet, and his looks kept attracting her attention away from the man inside. "Gosh," she said to herself, "no man ought to look like that unless all men do. He'd make a vampire of a haloed saint."

But she had felt something besides his looks, something that came out of him to meet her, a sudden joyous something that had delighted her. He had peered at her as one elf might at another passing in a green glade. She thought of some of the furtive looks that men on her father's yacht and men at her father's dinner-table had given her, and marvelled at the difference there could be in the admiration of a man's eye.

As Dane saddled his horse he stifled an unpleasant suspicion that he had no business to snatch at this chance of breaking up his mood. Though he might go about with no outward consciousness of his looks, he knew only too well the effect of them on women. And then, Valerie was the daughter of Dave Carr, a fact he must not forget. But he had the impression that she was a mere girl, and a good deal of a tomboy. His estimate of her was hopelessly wrong, as he was to find out, but he had never been at first any judge of the character of women.

## IV

Valerie watched him as he rode towards her. He rode as all Australians do, as if he had been born in the saddle. The horses recognized each other. His was black, lined like a racer, and a more nervous animal than hers.

"Where did you get him?" she asked.

"From Benton."

"Oh. That's where I got mine."

He gave one look at her and one at the beach ahead. "Let's go it," he said.

They started on a canter and broke into a gallop. She hung down on her bay's neck like a jockey urging it to keep up with the black which kept shooting ahead. The surf was a blurred gray line beside them as they raced on, letting the animals run themselves out, and when they slowed down panting and foaming, the last bit of lemon light had faded off the cool sea.

Valerie had lost her hair strings and her plaits were half undone. She picked her tumbled hair out of her eyes and both she and Dane searched hurriedly for their handkerchiefs, and tried to recover their natural breathing. It took them some time to bring their excited beasts back to the tame pace of a walk.

"That outpaced the goblins, I think," he said, smiling at her.

"Were they very bad goblins?" She put the sweet sympathy of a child into her tone.

"Rather. But what do you know about goblins?"

"What do I know about them? Well, I like that! I've goblins of my own. Haven't I a right to them?"

"Of course, if you insist on having them. But yours, I should imagine, are rather jolly."

She gave a contemptuous snort. "How like a man! Superior even about his tragedies."

"Good Lord, you can have all mine any day you want them," he said, with a tinge of bitterness in his voice.

They rode on in silence for a few minutes. Enough light radiated off the beach and the surf for them to see each other's faces. They had now reached a place on the coast where trees came down to the shore, and there was a little gully a few yards further on.

"Would you like to get off and smoke a while?" he asked.

"Yes, indeed."

He fastened the horses, and they sat down on the roots of a tree near them.

"How did you hear of your old place by the river?" she asked, after he had lit her cigarette and his pipe.

"Oh, I came wandering by it one day and saw 'For Sale' on the gate. I went in, and I never made a quicker decision about anything in my life. I bought it the next day. It's one of the few sensible things I ever did."

"I wonder if they have been so few," she said softly.

"I'm afraid they have. I haven't lived sensibly at all. I'm not like you, you see."

He shot a quick look at her.

"Oh dear! Have I suggested that I've lived sensibly?"

"Well, I may have misunderstood you. Suppose you explain yourself."

"Good Lord!" she laughed, but very pleased that he seemed interested. "Wherever shall I begin?"

"Well, let's go backwards. Why do you want to work on a paper?"

"Why——" she paused considering.

"Don't tell me if you don't want to," he said quickly.

"Oh, but I do. I was just thinking—about what led

up to it. I've always wanted to get away from home, be independent. I want to write. Don't smile. I never expect to write half as well as you do."

"I'm not smiling. And why should you not write as well as I do?"

"Well, I never expect to, but I want to write. I won a prize story in the *Weekly News* a few years ago and that set me going. But I don't expect to do it yet, nothing much before I am thirty. And dad said I'd better get a practical education as well. And so I took a commercial course. And then I thought I'd better get on a paper. I was on the *Star* for a while—society, rotten job. I couldn't stick it. And then dad got in with the *News* committee here and sent Bob up. He was on the *Herald*. And Bob saw it would take two of us. And he offered it to me and here I am. Of course that's not quite the whole of it."

"Nothing ever is the whole of it. But why should you want to write when you can play the piano as you do?"

"Why, I want to earn my own living, be independent."

"But you could do that with your music." He turned and looked at her.

"What! I care too much for music to play it in public! To a pack of unsympathetic boobs who rustle programmes and wriggle in squeaky chairs! Not I! I never played in public. I couldn't even play to my relatives. If there was one person around who did not like music I should get up and smash something."

He was astonished at the intensity that had welled up in her. She threw her cigarette away and sat up very straight glaring at him.

"But you play at Mac's?" he said.

"Oh there, yes, places like that, yes, but not on the stage."

"I understand that. They wanted me to go on the stage when I was a boy, but I could not sing that way."

"Oh." She turned warmly to him. She was craving to have him talk about himself. "But you sang one night in the hotel."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you go on?"

"Oh, I don't know. Did you want me to?"

"Of course."

They both looked out over the gray sea for some minutes.

"You know dad pretty well, don't you?" she began again.

"I've met him several times. He's a ripping good sport."

"Yes, isn't he quite something of a father? He and I always stood together. I don't know where I would have been but for him. It was he and I against the rest of them. The relatives, you know. Awful bunch! Awful!"

She felt the smile playing about his face.

"Didn't you run away from them once, or something?" He was curious now to hear her version of the tale.

"Why, where did you hear that?"

"I was in New Zealand at the time, on a visit in the South Island. And the story stuck in my memory along with your name. It was quite an adventure, wasn't it?"

"It was," she laughed.

"Do tell me about it."

"It is a long story."

"Well, what of that? I want to hear it."

She felt warm and excited at his interest. "It was more than an adventure," she began, "it was a crisis. It was my last stand for liberty."



"Good Lord! How old were you?"

"Fifteen."

"Liberty at fifteen! All right. Go on."

"I won't if you are going to laugh at me."

"Go on," he insisted, flashing a disrupting look at her.

## V

"Well, it all goes back to the fact that I happened to be born among my relatives."

"Most things seem to go back to that."

"Yes, don't they? And you see, they could never account for me any more than I could account for them, and the trouble was that they were always trying to account for me, while I had the sense to accept them for what they were. You know the kind of thing my family is."

"Let's see. Coronetted stationary, the younger son end of it, a name that goes back to property in the Doomsday Book, women who read *The Queen* and know every ramification of the Royal Family."

She laughed delightedly. "That's exactly it. And they were probably a nice harmless lot in England, but something happened to them on the voyage out. They were gods when they got here, and as gods they set themselves up. There were an awful lot of them all under the Elegancies, my mother's parents, you know. She was one of seven, and then there were the aunts and some old cousins, quite a party. And the Elegancies ruled them all. They were beautiful old pictures, I grant you that.

"Well, you know, they ran Auckland society. They gave two balls every winter that decided who was 'in' and who was 'out.' They entertained the Governors. They were old personal friends of Sir George Grey. And nobody ever questioned their right to rule like that—till I

came along. They captured dad for mother as they captured men for every daughter but poor Aunt Maud. That failure must have cost them some sad hours. Well, to come to me. Goodness knows what happened to me when I was an egg, but I got a queer poke from somewhere. Do you ever try to account for yourself?"

"Quite often," he smiled. "Go on, I'm awfully interested."

Feeling that he really was, Valerie loosened up as she went on. It seemed a long while since she had had someone to talk to. He puffed contentedly at his pipe, nodding occasionally, turning his face to her and smiling as she got more worked up with her story.

"Well, I was the third child, all girls to dad's disgust. But he always said I was a mistake in form. And then I had a queer twist. I couldn't believe the things that were told me. Something used to come up in my throat and say it was all wrong. And I had a most awful temper. I don't know what would have happened to me but for dad and the servants, because I couldn't stick the things the others did. And it was a fight. I was always being sent to bed without food, and the governess was always sneaking it up to me, God bless her! And I was always running out with my woes to the gardener. He was Irish, God bless him! I'm afraid I had no class loyalty. My best friends were the servants. It was better when I learned to play the piano and could read. And then dad got horses and the yacht, and the Lorrimers came to live next door. Bob and his sister had my kind of disease, too, in those days, and we had a conspiracy of our own. And there was a lot that was glorious. We had a beautiful place. You know that point in Remuera with a lot of pines out on the end. And I used to sit on the rocks there and watch the seagulls and dream of London and of living

by myself and being famous. Well, I must get on with the story.

"Of course the relatives opposed everything I ever wanted to do. But dad stood by me. He let me go to the grammar school. Of course I got on. Learning was no trouble to me. And I won a host of prizes that first year. And of course I went home a little puffed up, and I thought at last they would be proud of me. But Bob had taught his sister Doris and me to smoke cigarettes. It's funny now to think what that meant ten years ago. And the week after I got home mother poked about in my things, and found a packet of cigarettes and a love letter from some boy in one of my boxes. Well, I never poked about in anybody's things. I know what I think about people who do. And when the people who did things like that to me came to talk to me of morality or behaviour they couldn't impress me at all."

She paused for a moment, clasping her hands round her knees.

"Well, this was the grand row. Dad was away on the yacht. Mother summoned the Elegancies. I knew something was up and I was fighting mad. You see, I was so sick of it. There'd been a row when they found I wasn't in bed at ten one night and that I was sitting on the point wrapped up in a rug listening to a glorious gale. That was wrong. There'd been a row when I was discovered talking to the gardener in his room one night. They would have sacked him but for dad. That was wrong. There'd been a row when they found Byron's poems under my pillow. That was wrong. There'd been rows when I wouldn't go to stupid girls' parties, when I wouldn't go to the Elegancies for Christmas dinner (that was an awful one), when I wouldn't go to boarding-school, when I stopped saying my prayers, and when I wouldn't be con-

firmed. And I knew they just had the habit of opposition. But of course it was awful. I'm not saying that it wasn't. And I was so sick of it. But I had learned they couldn't do anything to me. I remember how wonderful it was when I discovered that they could not put me down the well in a sack, or lock me up in a cupboard, or things like that; that all they could do was just talk. And my dear old governess had taught me a wonderful thing when I was a little child, when Daphne and Rose used to pester me. You know that silly little jingle, 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me'? I can see her now as she said it, dear old thing. And I learned the philosophy in that old jingle, and it was a grand weapon. Of course I had ceased to be a lady so often that the word came to mean nothing. What I found was that I was still myself, with my own loves and hates, no matter what they called me. Goodness! I am rambling. Does this bore you? You see it's wonderful to have someone to talk to."

She peered into his face. He saw she was excited.

"I was just thinking how fine it was to hear someone really talk again. Go on. You are not boring me at all."

"Of course I know now that it was just as hard on them, poor things, as it was on me. I must have been a horrid little brute from their point of view. But I seemed so right to myself. It's funny how harmless we seem to ourselves, isn't it? And the governess thought I was right, and dad kept telling me to go ahead. Well, to come back to the cigarettes. Smoking seemed funny to me, just a lark, not to be compared with telling tales and doing sneaky things. But the dear relatives thought otherwise. So mother got her moral props, the Elegancies, old mummies that they were then, Aunt Maud, whom I particularly hated, and a brother and a sister. The idea was, I sup-

pose, to finish me with this weight of family majesty. Of course, if dad had been home she would not have done it. Well, we sat down to dinner, but if an avalanche is going to fall on me I'm not going to sit idle and watch it coming down. So I asked mother what the matter was. She said I would know presently. I said I'd know then, or leave the table and go to eat with the servants. My old grandfather held up a hand in the way he had always done to annihilate opinion. Something happened to me. I shouted at him to mind his own business, that as far as I was concerned he was dead. I wish you could have seen the faces. I'm sure they thought the moon and stars were coming right through the ceiling. If I'd had a dozen hands with pistols in each pointing at their heads they could not have looked more staggered. They were a ridiculous spectacle, and I lost my temper and told them what I thought of them. I made mother tell me about the letter and the cigarettes, and then I let them have it—all the bottled-up rage of my youth. Of course I was abominable. I gloried in the mess I was making of their nerves. Nothing short of physical force could have stopped me, and they didn't know what to do with me. Mother took hysterics and Aunt Maud wept. When I was done I was sick too. Then I stalked out and left them.

"I went down to the rocks and the boathouse, and presently Bob came; I'd told him something was up. And I told him I was going to run away and settle the thing. Well, he'd had a row too. The Bishop had found out he was reading Ingersoll. So we decided we'd both go. I guess I egged Bob on. I had three pounds in my money box and he had five. We got out that night about midnight. I was thrilled with the idea and quite reckless. I had a beauty of a little boat that we could sail or row, and he had a tent, and we sneaked out no end of things, my man-

dolin and his banjo, Stevenson's Wrecker and Treasure Island, a notebook for a diary and rugs and clothes. And there was a lot of stuff handy in the boathouse. It was a glorious night. Bob and I had often been off with dad on the yacht, you know. We could do everything, and there was nothing to scare us about the night.

"Would you believe it, we managed it for a week. We got over to Birkenhead the first night, and lay up a creek, and first thing in the morning we went and bought all the food we could carry. Then we had to hide for the day. The next night we got out of the harbour. We were awfully scared we would be nabbed, but we learned afterwards that mother, terrified out of her wits, would do nothing till dad got back, and wouldn't allow Bishop Lorrimer to do anything either. Oh, I forgot to say I'd left a note to dad, which mother, of course, read, saying sweetly that I was running away with Bob Lorrimer. I did not see at the time what a thunderbolt that would be. And mother was more afraid of the scandal than she was of our health. We ran away on the Saturday night, and it was Monday morning before dad knew. That let us clear Auckland harbour and get up the coast.

"You know, it was just wonderful! We had to travel at night, row and sail, and sleep by day hidden at the backs of the bays in little creeks. And I said the weather god loved us, for it was the most beautiful week, and the phosphorus out there in the channel at night! And of course there never were such stars! I can thrill with it all now. I never thought of the relatives. I knew they could do no more to me. But Bob was scared at first and did not get reckless till the third day. He really was a fine old Red Indian, and we were just a pair of sweet kids, with no idea what was being said about us. Well, we came to the end of our food, and to our last night. We

knew we would have to go to Kauwau Island the next day and get some more, and we guessed that would be the end of it. So we made a night of it. We had a fire, and we played, and we talked about religion and our ambitions, and nerved ourselves up to face the music. And a man riding for a doctor for a sick wife heard our banjo and mandolin, for by that time the whole of New Zealand was listening for them, and he got on the telephone, and first thing in the morning we were nabbed by two jolly yachtsmen who had been hunting us for days. It was thrilling to be caught. And my, what a row we had made."

Dane chuckled with her. "You certainly did. I remember it. But the papers made out a grand case for you, didn't they?"

"Oh, they were beautiful, and so was dad. He had the Auckland reporters to meet us at his office soon after we got there. They read our diary, heard what we had eaten and read and said and thought, and they came out with grandiloquent stuff about the fine old spirit of the British race, and our being fired with the days of Nelson and Drake. We were the symbol of undying youth in the great empire which was safe and sound so long as there was young blood like ours to renew the spirit of our glorious ancestors. You can imagine what all that was to the relatives."

Dane threw back his head and laughed out. "Grand old stuff. And how did they take it?"

"Well, I never did know exactly what happened in our absence. Mother was in the doctor's hands when we returned, and I did not see her for a week. It was delicately suggested to me that I had shortened her life by some years. She is still, as you know, alive and blooming, and will probably live to put flowers on my grave. I did not see the Elegancies for at least a month. In fact, every-

body kept out of my way. I got at what it was at last through Bob. Mother and the relatives and the Bishop and Mrs. Lorrimer had had solemn conferences about the advisability of marrying us at once on our return, Bob eighteen, and me fifteen. But dad damned them up hill and down dale and shut them up somehow. But Bob got the worst of that, and he ran away from home for years, went to the South and to Australia. And it was what they thought about Bob and me that just finished the whole bunch for me. . . . There, I said it was a long story. I do hope I haven't bored you."

Her manner changed suddenly.

"You have not," he said, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. "It's a proper story, and explains a lot." He was as much interested, indeed more so, in the way she had told it than in the tale itself.

She wanted to ask him questions about himself. She felt hot and very alive, for she had got herself quite worked up. And after her long talk the silence seemed abrupt and likely to become significant. He looked very boyish sitting still with his hands clasped now round his knees, and his face turned so that she could see his profile clearly against the trunk of the tree. He sensed her intensity and wondered if it was just her own dramatic sense that had so wound her up.

"Yes, you have had goblins too," he said, quietly turning his face to her. "I think it was pretty fine that you could stand against all that."

"I rather liked standing a lot of it," she said honestly.

She felt the smile that played about his eyes. And then he stood up, cutting off whatever mood they might have drifted into.

"Come on, let's ride again."

She was not accustomed to following the moods of men.



She had been a good deal spoiled, and was used to having them follow her. But she felt, as she mounted, that perhaps at last she had met a man who could do a little managing himself. But she had a queer feeling of flatness after her eager talking, and it took some minutes of a brisk canter to bring her to a mood of self-possession. Dane did not seem disposed to talk any more, and they set their horses to another gallop.

When they slowed down again he began to smoke, and she ventured no more than casual remarks about men at Mac's, hoping he would talk, and being disappointed that he did not. When they got to the ravine she supposed he would stop, but he rode on with her, letting his horse lead in the blackest part where they could not see each other or even their own hands held up before them. When they came into the light he began to talk of the sense animals had in the night, and went on to tell her tales of riding out in the great spaces of Australia. He kept the talk absolutely impersonal till they came to the borders of Dargaville. There he pulled up.

"I'll turn back here," he said, guiding his horse beside hers. "Thanks awfully, Miss Freedom, for dispersing the goblins." He held out his hand.

For a moment he seemed immaterial to her, a phantom on a black horse. But there stirred about him an effulgent warmth that was anything but ethereal. As she took his hot and nervous hand, she bit back a question on her lips, for she wanted it to come from him.

"I've had a jolly time," she said instead. "I do hope I did not bore you."

"You did not. Good-night." He rode off without looking back.

She was conscious of keen disappointment as she rode on, and yet why she did not know. Had she expected

more response from him, or what? He had got away from her after she had told her story, but he had seemed pleased to have her company. Was she surprised that he had come so soon to companionable silences? She did not know. But she did know as she lay wakeful in her bed that she had met a personality that was not to be disposed of in general terms. And already she wondered when she would meet it again.

Dane thought about her for a little while after he left her. The ride had shaken him out of his depression and out of his loneliness. And after all it had been pleasant to listen to a girl talk with the vividness she had and the honesty she had. And he realized she was not just the girl he had thought her at the beginning of the evening. He wondered how much of a woman she was. And he knew, too, that he would like to see her again.

## CHAPTER VII

### I

"**N**O, Jimmy, you'd better not come back to-night."

"You can't do those jobbing proofs by yourself, Miss Carr."

"Can't I?" Valerie smiled up into the face of the boy who hovered over her. She knew he was longing to be asked to come back and do his part with the men. "All right. Then I will be glad to have you to-night. I'll be here at seven. You try to get a run round in the fresh air before you come in."

"Yes, Miss Carr." He went out whistling merrily.

Valerie looked at her watch. It was half-past five. Miss Hands came out of the composing-room.

"Now, Miss Hands," said Valerie, "I insist that you don't come back to-night. You can to-morrow if it looks as if we won't get through. I shall be sorry I took that job, you know, if anybody gets sick on it."

Miss Hands' thin face was lit with a sacrificial smile.

"It isn't tiring working for you, Miss Carr," she said.

Valerie felt a sudden gulp in her throat. The faithfulness of these people sometimes made her want to throw bricks at them. But she shot a quick look at the woman who had been so easily overwhelmed by a little ordinary kindness.

"Miss Hands, it means a lot to me to hear you say that. But it's part of my job not to overwork you. Now you rest to-night."

Ryder and Johnson came out of the composing-room

door struggling into their coats. They had their hats on the backs of their heads, and they lit cigarettes as they paused.

"I couldn't quite finish that sporting copy, Miss Carr," said Ryder. "I'll come back to do it. I don't like to keep my wife waiting for dinner."

"Thanks, Mr. Ryder. But I don't like to have you come back for that. Perhaps I can manage it."

"Not at all. I'll be glad to come back."

"I'll be back for a couple of hours, Miss Carr," said Johnson.

"All right, thanks, good-night."

Miss Hands and the men went out together. Valerie stretched herself. "What a wonderful thing work is. It puts such colour into people," she thought.

It was Thursday evening of the last week in March. Bob had been away since the previous Saturday going over part of the electorate with Roger Benton, and Valerie was running the paper herself. Bob had left leaders ready for the Monday and the Wednesday. Valerie said she could manage one for Friday. She had her books all up to date now, could edit the telegrams and cablegrams, and was more than equal to the reporting and paragraphing and editorial work. It was not the paper or the book-keeping that troubled her so much as the drudgery of the proof-reading on the jobbing.

Most New Zealand newspapers have their own general printing plants, and the *News* committee expected in time to have the expenses paid by the jobbing work of the river towns. There was only one way to beat the Auckland presses at this business, and that was to do it cheaper and faster than they could. Valerie took little interest in the bill-heads and circulars and letter-heads and show schedules, and what interest she did take was centred in John-

son's pride in turning out good work. She only wished he could read his own proofs, but that turned out to be mostly her job, and one that often had to be done at night.

The week that Bob thought would be a slack one turned out to be strenuous. On the Tuesday morning Townshend, the owner of the biggest timber mill up the river, walked into the office.

"Where's the boss?" he asked as Valerie got up from her chair.

"I am for the present," she smiled. "What can I do for you?"

He looked doubtfully at her. "Well, I thought I'd try you people on a job. But I guess I'd better send it on to Auckland."

"Dear me! Do I look as discouraging as all that?" She gave him a ravishing smile. "And it's hardly fair to judge the jobbing work by me, anyway. I don't do it. But we have one of the best men from Auckland here who does, and he's bored to death because we haven't jobs worthy of his skill. Now this one of yours might just save his reason. You might let me have a look at it."

His shrewd eyes had lit up as she talked. He took a bundle of timber specifications out of his pocket and unrolled them. He didn't suppose she would understand them in the least. And she didn't, but she gazed at them with the greatest interest. There were fifteen different kinds of sheets, and she was really alarmed at the multiplicity of red and black lines and the complicated figures and the amount of careful proof-reading it would take. And she had no idea whether Johnson could do it, or whether they had the paper.

"This looks like the stuff he's been itching for," she said warmly. "How many do you want of each and when

do you want them, and must it be exactly this same quality of paper?"

"I want five thousand of each altogether, but you could do it in lots of five hundred. I want the first lot delivered next Monday by the Tangiteroria steamer. The paper doesn't have to be identical, but the nearest you can do."

"Can you wait till this afternoon for an estimate? You can get the Auckland mail to-night if you don't like our offer."

"Yes, I'll do that. I'm going to be here all day. I'll come in about three o'clock. Good-morning," and he walked out.

Valerie hurried in to Johnson.

"I don't know what I've let you in for. But come and look at this."

They spread the sheets out on a bench. Johnson saw at once it was far and away the best job the place had produced, that it was indeed a good hard one, a real test of what he could do. It warmed Valerie to see how keen he was to do it. They called Ryder into the conference.

"We haven't the paper," he said.

She looked woefully disappointed. But a search disclosed a few sheets that would do as a specimen. Johnson wrote out an urgent telegram to a printing house in Auckland as to the possibility of getting paper up the next day, and Jimmy rushed off with it to the post-office. Johnson and Ryder dropped what they were doing, and started to work out a scale of prices based on day and overtime rates.

"Would you work overtime on it?" asked Valerie.

"You bet, rather than lose it," answered Johnson.

"But you will have the worst of it, Miss Carr. It will be a beastly thing to read."

When Townshend walked in at three o'clock she was

ready for him. He approved the paper and the price, and she assured him they would be in time.

"All right. Go ahead," he smiled into her keen face.

This job was straining the energies of the whole office. Ryder had to help Johnson on the difficult setting, and this threw a lot more work on Miss Hands and the local girls and Jimmy. But the whole staff rose to the occasion.

## II

After they had gone this Thursday evening Valerie worked on till a quarter past six. There had been that week a return of heat, a last flicker of summer. The office was very stuffy, and she felt tired and worn. She hurried to the hotel for a quick dinner, hoping she was not going to have a headache. Her feet dragged as she walked to her table. This was one of the nights when she could not take Mac's dining-room humorously.

"You do look so tired, Miss Carr," said Lizzie.

"I really am, Lizzie," she smiled back. She ordered a light meal and held her head in her hands. When she raised it again she saw that Mac and Dane Barrington had come in. They both nodded at her smile, and then she began to feel better. She saw Michael go to their table, but she did not notice Mac nod at her and give an order. As she began her dinner the seedy Irishman came up to her with a bottle of Burgundy and poured out a glass.

"It's the spoiled lady you are, for sure," he said slyly.

"Ah, it's so nice to be spoiled, Michael." Her eyes twinkled at him. Then she raised her glass to the table at the other end of the room, oblivious of curious glances

from men near by, and she was delighted that Dane as well as Mac drank to her in return. This incident warmed her up to such an extent that she felt better.

Soon after she got back to the office she felt the ominous return of her headache. Jimmy had been waiting on the steps for her. She could never get ahead of him. He liked to watch her coming, to flourish his cap at her, to take the key and open the door and stand by for her as if she were a queen. He did it all with a twinkle in his eye as if he enjoyed being romantic.

Soon after he and Valerie had settled down to the proof-reading Ryder and Johnson came in and the jobbing machine began to shake the building.

Ryder came out again at a quarter past eight ready to go.

"You look a bit sick," he said to Valerie.

"Yes, I have a headache."

"Can't you leave it?"

"No. We'll be done with this by half-past eight. How much copy have you for the morning?"

"A column and a few sticks."

"That all? Well, I must have the leader and the meeting done to-night. I can manage it. That sporting copy of yours has helped a lot."

Ten minutes after he had gone out she put down her pencil. "Now, Jimmy, nothing more. You get out of this at once."

When she had got him out she held on to her head, feeling she could do nothing till the jobbing machine stopped. It went on till nine. Then Johnson came out hot and tired.

His intelligent brown eyes looked admiringly at her.

"I say, why don't you knock off? You look as if you'd done enough for one day."



"I wish I could, but I've got to do a leader and a meeting."

"Sorry. I can't help, can I?"

"No indeed, thanks just the same. Good-night."

### III

In a few minutes there was silence. Few people went by that way at night unless there happened to be a vessel at the station wharf or freight trains running late. Riders might pass after the hotels were closed. Men rarely worked in the evening in the nearest stores on the town side. Occasionally sounds from the houses at the back drifted in. Valerie was gladly conscious of the quiet, but it did not help her much.

These occasionally devastating headaches were the one blot upon her otherwise vigorous health. Once past a certain point they accumulated pain with express speed, and reduced her to nausea and utter helplessness. She knew no cure but to lie down and take a big dose of aspirin. Then at the end of an hour she was all right again. But she had used up her stock of tablets and the chemist was now closed. As the copy had to be ready for Ryder at half-past eight in the morning it could not be put off, and she knew she must fight the pain as best she could. She began to write slowly struggling against it. But her head dropped in spite of her. She felt as if she were going to faint.

The opening of the door stimulated her to raise her face. She had not heard steps. In a mist she saw Dane Barrington looking at her over the high counter.

"Why, Miss Carr, what is the matter? You look beastly ill." He came quickly round to her.

She tried to keep her head up. "It's only a headache, and I must work." She never wondered why he was there.

"Well, you can't work looking like that. Have you ever taken aspirin?"

"Yes, but I haven't any."

"I have. Will you take it and go home?"

"I can't go home. I have a leader to write, and—and a meeting." The effort to keep up nauseated her. Her head dropped back onto her hands.

Dane leaned his snake stick against the corner of her table, opened the door into the composing-room, struck a match and lit a near gas jet. Then he hurried to the back door, opened it and looked out into the small yard littered with boxes, barrels and paper. He saw there was a high wooden fence all round it and that no one could look in. It had odours of its own, but it was incomparably fresher and cooler than any place inside. He found two large sheets of brown paper on a bench and spread them out on a flat place near a tap where water dropping into a bucket cooled the air. Then he went quickly back to Valerie.

"Come on, Miss Carr, and lie down. I've fixed a clean place. You'll be all right soon if you keep still."

He put an arm round her and helped her out. She did not seem conscious of him at all. Hardly knowing what she was doing she dropped down on to the paper and lay dizzy with pain. Mechanically she clutched at her throat. She was wearing a shirt-waist with a collar that though soft seemed to be choking her. Very deftly with his sensitive hands Dane undid the knotted tie and loosened it. Then he found a tumbler inside, rinsed it at the tap and filled it.

"Can you take a good dose?" he asked leaning over her.

"Yes, oh yes," she mumbled.

He took a little box out of his vest pocket, gave her

five tablets, and helped her to drink half the glass of water. Then she slumped back and lay still, her face livid with pain. He was torn with misery at the sight of it. He searched for a clean handkerchief, and finding one, soaked it in water and put it on her hot forehead. Then he undid her heavy ropes of hair, spread them out on the paper, and carefully laid the large amber pins together in one place. Looking at her thus he thought her beautiful.

He leaned over her again. "Tell me if you can what you were going to write a leader about."

"The Warendon fire—I wanted to make it good—something on heroism—you know ——"

"I know. I'll do it. How long did you want it?"

"A column, if I could—we need the copy."

"All right. I'll do it. Lie still, and you will be better by the time it is finished."

She was vaguely conscious that he covered her up with something, and then that she was alone. For a time, it seemed an eternity, she was sure her head was flying to bits. There were ghastly explosions of agony when she clenched her hands to keep from screaming, and then it all went suddenly, and she had exquisite moments of relief at the cessation of the pain. She slid into dream-land. She did not know where she was or remember that she had had a headache. She was aware of pale stars over her head and of the sheen of the moon tipping over the roof of the office. Then she thought she was in a boat. She could hear water. She tried to turn her head. She was mildly puzzled that she could not move it. She tried her arms. They too were made of lead. But she lay on untroubled by this phenomenon and drifted into curious dreams and profound oblivion.

## IV

It was a quarter to eleven when Dane had finished writing. He was astonished when he saw how late it was. Valerie must have fallen asleep, he thought. He went quietly out through the dimly lit composing-room and saw from the doorway that she lay exactly as he had left her with his coat unmoved, showing that she had never stirred. He leaned down to look at her. Her face was not so livid now, and he was struck again with the distinction of it, and by an expression of sadness and disillusionment that was not there when her eyes were open and her features ablaze with the light from them. No, she was not the mere child he had thought her. He looked at her shapely, passionate mouth, contrasting with the intellectual forehead and the balance in the rest of her face. That mouth beguiled him, enticed him, overcame him. He told himself he was a fool to play with the temptation to kiss her, but he leaned lower and very delicately kissed the unconscious lips, thereby stirring in himself senses that after considerable starvation were only too ready to be stirred. He sat up a little ashamed of himself, but as she did not stir he leaned down recklessly and did it again. He took up her ropes of hair and laid them against his cheek enjoying the fragrance of them. He had always loved women's hair when it was soft and fine like this. He was just thinking she was very sound asleep when a noise staggered him and brought him to his feet with a sickening sense of shock.

What he distinctly heard was the opening of the front door. In a flash it went through his mind that the office was lit, that it was a public place, and that anyone could come in as he himself had done. And he was here in the yard with Valerie unconscious and prostrate upon the

ground. Instinctively he snatched up his coat and put it on while a variety of lies raced through his mind.

But whatever the situation, it would be improved if she were awake. He dropped on his knees beside her, took his handkerchief off her forehead, and spoke with anxious tenseness.

"Miss Carr, wake up! Wake up! You are all right now."

As she did not stir he shook her lightly, but it had no effect upon her. As he thought it strange she should be so sound asleep he heard the front door close again. But whether the person who had closed it was in or out he did not know. He stepped cautiously to the back door. If there was anyone there who might come through there was only one thing for him to do, go in at once and find out what manner of man he had to deal with.

Then he heard a very comforting sound, that of steps retreating along the path. After a minute or two of reassuring silence in the building he stepped inside and walked quickly to the office. There was no one there. He hurried to the front door and saw the figure of a man in the moonlight going off towards the town. He could not make out who he was. There was no one else about. He had been in tight places in his life, but never had he felt more relieved. He turned the key in the lock, put out the light, leaving the office in darkness, shut the composing-room door, drew the blinds of the side windows, and went back to wake Valerie.

He wished himself out of this now, and reflected sadly what an everlasting fool he was with his lack of suspicion. He ought to have remembered the office was a public place. Still at that hour who would have expected anyone to have business with the paper? He leaned quickly down over Valerie and spoke her name. Then for the first time he

noticed her shallow breathing. He shook her violently, and saw that her eyes opened and closed with an uncomprehending stare. Frantically he found matches, struck one, pulled up her eyelid, and saw the dilated pupil.

His heart stopped. "My God! My God! What have I done?" he groaned.

He dived into his vest pockets, drew out two little boxes, struck another match and examined the contents. Then he sprang to his feet. For a moment he stood overcome by a speechless rage at this damnable trick that fate and his own carelessness had played him. He wondered how many men in the history of the world had gone down to obloquy for no stronger cause. But he dare not add inaction to carelessness, whatever the result to himself. There was nothing to do but to trust the two men in the town he knew he could trust.

Spreading out paper on the composing-room floor, with great difficulty he raised Valerie and carried her in. He took in her hairpins and put them beside her. He locked the back door. He hesitated about the gas, but finally left the jet burning low, in case she came to in his absence, though he had little hope of that. He went through the office without lighting it, opened the front door and looked out. He blessed the regular habits of the town. There was not a soul in sight. He locked the door behind him, and with the key in his hand began to run. It worried him dreadfully to think of Valerie lying on the floor even in the midst of the harmless machinery. There might be mice or rats.

He was thankful to find the hotel fairly quiet. What he would do if Doctor Steele was away he did not know, but the doctor was in the very first room he poked his head into, playing poker with a stranger.

"Lucky I have my case here, D. B.," he said, when he

had heard the bare facts. "Let's get Mac and find out how soon we can bring her along."

The big Irishman was in his own room. The tale did not surprise him in the least.

"I'll have every —— son of a —— —— out of the way by half-past twelve. Nothing much doing to-night. I'll clear Mike to bed, and sit up for you myself. Back door. Come through the yard."

"Damnation, it's going to be risky bringing her through the town," said Dane.

"Of course, you bloody fool," said Mac good-humouredly, "don't do it. Take a boat."

And though the distance was less than half a mile that is what they did.

They found Valerie exactly as Dane had left her. The doctor at once applied stimulants to her heart and respiration and bent over her watching, while Dane stood by racked with anxiety. But strained as he was, he was struck by the picture the gloomy doctor made there on his knees, playing his small flashlight over the face of the unconscious Valerie who lay like the effigy of a mediæval princess on the top of her own sarcophagus pale and stiff.

"She's all right, D. B. Splendid heart. She'll come out very well."

"Thank God!"

The doctor wrapped round her a rug they had brought from the hotel, and drew up a wooden chair so that he could look down on her face. Dane drew a stool to the other side of her and dropped on to it. After a few minutes the doctor took out his watch.

"A quarter to twelve. Well, we'd better wait till half-past. Haven't got any cards about you, have you, Barrington?"

Something on the expression of the other man's face arrested him.

"Why not have a game to pass the time?" he asked solemnly.

"It's a perfectly good idea, Doc," smiled Dane with a little shrug of the shoulders. "A pleasant antidote to the hour I have just spent. You know, if I couldn't have trusted you and Mac I might just as well have shot myself?"

"As bad as that?" said the doctor laconically keeping his eye on Valerie.

"Well, it was for less than this that I was black-balled in Christchurch," said Dane, with intense bitterness.

"Yes, it is unfortunate that men are often judged not for what they have done, but for what the men who judge them would have done in their place."

The flashlight cast fantastic shadows on the walls through the frames of the impassive old printing press and the spick and span jobbing machine, and glittered on steel wheels and rods. The bulky cases of type loomed up above them, and the heavy tables and benches added to the weight of the air in the close room. But Dane had been afraid to let the doctor open the doors lest at that hour of the night the light attracting someone should be taken for a fire. He was only too anxious to see Valerie safe in her room in the hotel.

"Wonderful thing, a woman," said the doctor softly, gazing down at Valerie with profound reverence.

Dane thought of the other man's wife as he had seen her one day as conspicuous in the middle of River Street as a red barn in the middle of a ploughed field, as blatant as the blaring of a circus troupe, and he marvelled at this inextinguishable charity.



"I wish I could believe it again, Doc," he said, and they fell into a silence.

At half-past twelve he investigated the neighbourhood for signs of activity, but the whole place was peacefully asleep. The doctor partly roused Valerie when he picked her up, but she gazed at him with a mild surprise and closed her eyes again. He carried her out to the boat while Dane, using his flashlight, restored the composing-room to its ordinary arrangement. He carefully put the brown paper back where he had found it, collected all the amber pins, and put out the gas. But he forgot to raise the blinds. In the office he felt the hand of fate upon him again. The circle of light fell on his stick, which he had completely forgotten. Had the man who had come in recognized that stick? Then he saw Valerie's coat and small bag on a hook. He cursed himself for the worst fool ever born as he gathered them up.

But he did feel considerable relief as he rowed the boat along to the hotel, reflecting as he looked at the doctor sitting with Valerie in his arms, that the sleepers in little towns don't know any more than those in big ones what strange things may go on round them in the night.

## V

A little after seven the next morning Doctor Steele slipped out of Bob's room, where he had stayed to watch Valerie, and into hers, and gave her a strong injection of caffeine. Then he sat down on the bed beside her till she roused.

"Why, doctor!" She opened her eyes wider and wider, and rubbed them and started to raise herself.

"Lie still. There's nothing the matter. Just get hold of yourself and think."

She looked at him, puzzling about in her memory.

"Well, how do you feel?"

"Feel?" She shook herself. "What has happened to me?" Then she looked at him in amazement as if she did remember something. "What is it, doctor? I feel stupid, very heavy in my head. Aren't I all right?"

"Quite," he said, in his even manner. "But you had a headache last night, do you remember? In the office?"

She struggled to clear the fog in her mind. "Why, yes, I had. I remember now." Her eyes widened again. And he saw a tense enquiry in them.

"What do you remember?" he asked.

She hesitated. "Why, I—I just had a headache. But it was very bad. I do get them very bad. Did I try to come home and faint, or what?"

"H'm!" he thought to himself. "You're on the defensive for him already."

"No," he went on aloud, "you didn't faint. You remember that Barrington went into the office? Well, he gave you morphia in mistake for aspirin, one and a quarter grains, a nice little dose."

"Oh, heavens! Well, please don't blame him. It hasn't done me any harm. I do hope nobody knows."

Something like a smile gathered at the back of the doctor's sepulchral eyes. "Nobody who will ever mention it, my dear young lady, only Mac and myself. We keep the secrets of this town. Now presently, when Father Ryan goes down to breakfast, Barrington will slip in here to tell you about it. I'll see there is nobody around. You can get up when he has gone. Drink all the strong coffee you can for breakfast and eat plainly. You'll feel stupid perhaps all day. But you're all right now."

He stood up as he finished, and with a laconic nod he went quietly out.

He left behind him a patient who was stimulated with more than the caffeine. Valerie heard low sounds in the next room and hoped Father Ryan would go down early as he usually did. She tried to think back over the evening before, but everything was blank after the appearance of Dane's face over the counter. She was very curious now to know what had happened. Then she heard Father Ryan close his door and go off along the hall. She wondered if he had heard anything in the night. But, she reflected, he would never tell.

She heard a low knock on her door. In answer to her quick reply Dane came through it in stockinged feet and closed it behind him.

Valerie had raised herself on her pillows and her abundant hair fell about her like a cascade of gold, but she saw at once that he was quite oblivious of the fact that she was in bed or that she had any hair at all. He moved forward to the bedside near the foot, and looked at her with intensely worried eyes. His face was strained and she knew he had not slept.

"Oh, Miss Carr," he began at once in a nervous whisper, "can you believe me and forgive my damned carelessness? I gave you morphia last night by mistake. I had aspirin." He put his hands to his pockets and pulled out the two little boxes. "But somehow in my hurry and in the bad light I got the wrong thing. You were suffering so badly: You see." He held the boxes out to her.

Valerie spoke slowly for it was still an effort to talk. "Oh, my dear man, you don't have to produce any evidence."

"You believe me?"

"Good Lord! May I ask why I shouldn't believe you? Why, you look as if you'd never been believed before!"

For he had looked at her out of most grateful but rather incredulous eyes.

"When I can tell you the story I think you'll understand. The thing that is worrying me still is that somebody came in when I had you in the yard, when I found I couldn't wake you. I don't know who it was, but he went out again almost at once. He didn't see us, I'm sure, but I'd left my stick in there ——"

"Oh, don't let that worry you for a minute." She had recovered sufficiently to put contempt into her tone.

"I came at once for the doctor," he went on, "and we had to tell Mac. But he is absolutely trustworthy ——"

"Heavens above!" she broke in, "what are you talking about? What are you afraid of?"

"Oh, Miss Carr," he threw out his hands, and shook his head. "If you'd been hit as I have ——"

"My friend, if the other women you have known have been malignant beasts, please don't judge me by them. It's not very complimentary to me or to your own judgment."

Something in her eyes hypnotized him and his mobile face lightened.

"I apologize for my judgment. I'm afraid it never has been very good. Now I want to know if I can't help you to-day. You won't feel like work. Is there anything I could write here and send along?"

"You did the leader?" She was beginning to think quite clearly now.

"Yes, a column. And I wrote up an interesting bit of news I got yesterday about an Englishman up at Townshend's mill who has just come into a fortune. I know him, and the news is accurate. You will have it ahead of the Auckland papers. I did nearly a column of that, thinking you could cut it if you did not want it all. That's

what I stopped in to give you last night. I was going to bring it in this morning, but seeing your light as I was going home I changed my mind."

"Oh, that was awfully good of you. Then I've got all I need. There isn't anything else you can do. I can manage it all."

"Are you sure? You're really all right?" He was seeing the woman now, her flushed face and bright eyes set in the cloud of hair.

"Quite. You had a much worse night than I did. But now, please forget it." She held out her hand.

He took it, raised it to his lips, kissed it twice, dropped it without looking at her, and slipped out of the door.

She stared for some seconds at the place where he had disappeared. "Well! Romantic! that man! But why am I surprised?"

Then she thought over what he had told her. And then she felt a chill upon this rather exciting event. She wondered whether he made a habit of taking morphia.

She was in the office at nine o'clock reading his leader. It was a beautiful bit of writing, so out of the common rut of such work that it was copied in full afterwards by a number of papers with comments on the inspired moment that had fallen upon the editor of the *News*. Then she read the account of the Englishman and his windfall. It was excellent journalism. She would not cut a word of it. She labelled both and took them in to the foreman.

Later in the day Ryder looked at her curiously. He alone of the staff had noticed that she was not quite herself.

"Bully stuff, that leader, Miss Carr," he said.

"Yes, isn't it? Mr. Barrington gave it to me last night with the other copy."

Ryder did not tell her that he guessed who had written it. He did not ask her why he found the office empty the night before when he had stepped in as he was going by to see if her head was better. He had seen her hat and coat, and he had seen Dane Barrington's stick. He had just observed these things and had gone out. And he did not ask her why he had found the blinds drawn all round the composing-room that morning. And neither Valerie nor Dane ever learned who it was who had opened and closed the front door.

## CHAPTER VIII

### I

**V**ALERIE lay in the shade of a solitary clump of five stunted trees on the edge of the cliffs about two miles north of the ravine. It was the Sunday following the headache. She had finished up her work that morning, buoyed up by the thought that she would get out to the sea in the afternoon. It was a fine windy day, cool and clear. The breeze was strong on the cliffs and below her the surf tumbled riotously.

She had found on the very edge of the cliffs a rush-grown pocket like the pit of an old Maori fortification, with one end worn down so that sitting she could see the surf splintering itself into harmless froth below. She sat down, drew her chin up to her knees, and began to dream of that magnificent future when she should have literary London at her feet. Then she turned to the last number of the *Sydney Bulletin* that she had brought with her, and reading, grew dozy and settled herself to sleep. She lay on her side facing the sea, with a light cloak drawn partly over her and the sun and wind burning her right cheek.

And it was thus, unconscious, that Dane wandering along the cliffs came noiselessly upon her.

Astonished and then amused he stood looking down on her. He had taken his pipe from his mouth at the first sight of her, but he put it back and puffed on. He was aware of the fine lines of her figure under her serge dress and the cloak, and of the easy way she lay. He was vaguely regretful that a soft hat kept the sunlight off her

hair. He remembered how she had looked when he had kissed her. He had a ridiculous impulse to kiss her again, to waken her with his kisses, and to hear what she would say. He was conscious, too, as he looked at her that he had been lonely for a long time.

He told himself to go on. But something held him.

He had never analyzed, any more than anyone else ever does, the beginnings of adventures in friendship. He had always drifted pleasantly, unquestioningly, into acquaintance with women as if there never was any further stage in the relationship. He had learned little from the experience that the affair almost always proceeded on some inner compulsions of its own to the passionate and then to the tragic climax. Born to love life and love and to respect them both, he had taken them in their flow with simplicity and childlike trust, and with for a long time an incurable ignorance of the unpleasant fact that life and love by no means meant the same thing to all men or to all women. He had been a trustful lover, and inevitably a betrayed and terribly hurt lover, quite unable to realize the effect of his looks on women who had nothing more to give him than a crazed infatuation.

He had loved for their beauty and charm a few unscrupulous women who had left him bereft of any idea as to why their affections did not last. He could never imagine what it was that had wrecked the ship on a smiling sea, for he never looked out for sunken derelicts, but was always gazing at the stars or searching for enchanted islands on the skyline. He had been astounded and then embittered to learn the tales that were told of him. Why of him and not of others, he wondered. In fact, like many artists of exquisite sensibility and far-reaching imagination, he lived in a continual state of wonder at the goings on in the world about him, at motives that were not



his, at animosities he could never feel, at rivalries that never touched him, at meannesses that could not have lived for a moment in the generous expanses of his mind.

But, as he looked now at Valerie, he forgot what other women had done to him. He moved very quietly to sit down on the edge of the hollow till she should wake. But something, the sense of life, or the smell of his pipe startled her, and she sat up quickly, and seeing him rubbed her eyes as if she were in a dream.

"Why, it is *you!*" she said, staring at him.

He looked down whimsically at himself as if he needed corroboration, and then he smiled at her. Now, as for the first time she saw him in broad daylight, she saw that the sun worked magic in his eyes, turning them to gentian blue, and that something in the optical machinery in his head darkened and lightened them, as if they were lenses at the ends of tubes lit and dimmed by multiple lights and screens behind. And she thought of the words the King of the City said to Shri in the old Sanscrit tale, "Thy dark blue eyes have utterly destroyed my sense of right and wrong, which are now mere words without meaning, impotent to hold me."

"I didn't mean to wake you. I was going to play the guardian knight. You are all right again? I rode in on Friday evening to ask Doc Steele."

"I know you did. He told me. Now tell me the story. What did you do with me?"

With the omission of his own emotional moments he told what had happened without elaboration. She watched him as he talked sitting now opposite her with his face turned towards the sea, and his hair stirring about his head, very fine black hair, that even in the sunlight had no suspicion of a sheen upon it.

"I wish I knew who it was who came in," he said, at the end.

"Goodness me, are you still thinking about that? You had a perfect right to be in the office."

"That's the trouble," he smiled, "I wasn't in it."

"Oh, pooh!"

He looked quizzically at her. "I wish you'd teach me to go through the world with my thumb to my nose as you do."

She laughed out merrily. "Is that the way you see me?"

"Yes, it is. And I've come to the conclusion it's the only way to take the world. I hope you will keep it up."

"I mean to, and when they put me in my coffin my hand will set that way." She laughed again at the picture this conjured up in her mind.

"Gorgeous youth," he said, a little bitterly, looking away from her.

She sobered at once. It was absurd that he should speak of youth as something in the long lost years behind him, for he was looking young enough as he sat there. She thought of something to divert him from introspection.

"I say, that leader of yours was stunning. I couldn't have done it without being sentimental. You make me green with envy. And do you know that you have had quite a lot to do with the making of me?" He followed her glance to the *Sydney Bulletin*. "I've been taking that for ten years, ever since I read an article by you on Joseph Conrad."

"Oh, really!" He looked quickly at her and away again.

"And you have been my literary adviser ever since. You introduced me to Shaw, Wells, Ibsen, George Moore,

Oscar Wilde, Synge, Yeats, Lafcadio Hearn, Ambrose Bierce, Nietzsche, Turgenieff, Dostoievsky, oh, hosts of men. And I've just read your article there on Masfield. You know, you've kindled fierce fires in my brain. You've filled me with a glorious discontent. You've made New Zealand too small for me. You've made me want to write, to travel, to get to London and Paris and see the world. See what you've done! Made a raving fever out of a perfectly good lotus eater."

He had turned to look at her as she talked, and thought again she was the most vivid thing he had ever seen.

"Good God! I apologize. How little one realizes the devastating effects of one's work."

She laughed out again. She was becoming a little excited at seeing she could interest him. He took up the *Bulletin* and began idly turning the pages.

"I haven't this number myself yet," he said. "I suppose it is in my mail." He came to a clever cartoon and showed it to her. "The chap who does those is a friend of mine, a cripple, but one of the jolliest fellows I ever knew." Her face clouded. "Oh, don't pity him. He hasn't missed much. After all it's what goes on in your mind that matters, not what goes on in your legs."

She agreed with her eyes, and then got him talking about Sydney and the men he knew there till the sun was down glaring in their faces across the sea.

She took out her watch.

"Do you have to go?" She was only too disposed to hear regret in his tone.

"Well, no—but I'm awfully hungry."

He looked into her eyes and fell for her intention as he had so often fallen for women's intentions.

"I say, will you come along and have tea with me in the tent? There is nobody about now."

Belligerency danced into her eyes in an instant.

"What the dickens does it matter whether there is anybody about or not? I'm going to settle this with you now. Are you afraid to be seen with me or do you think I'm afraid to be seen with you, which?"

He was astonished at this brutal frankness. "Good Lord! do you go at everything like that?" He looked helplessly at her.

"Well?" she demanded.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Is it your reputation you're worried about? Do you think I don't know it, and everything that has been whispered and rumoured and concocted about you by people who sin by wallowing in the supposed sins of others? Why, I'm far more of an authority on your reputation than you are. And that's what I care for it!" She snapped her fingers. "Or is it that you've heard I'm engaged to Bob Lorrimer? Well, I'm not, and I never will be. So much for that. Now what is it?"

Then her eyes fell before his, which were burning with a curious intensity. But he got lightly to his feet and held out a hand to her.

"Come on then," he said softly.

"I believe you understand me," she said lightly, as she stood beside him.

"You flatter me, Miss Freedom. I don't even understand myself with whom I have lived these thirty odd years." He picked up her cloak and the *Bulletin* and his stick.

## II

They scrambled down the cliffs and went along the beach delighted with the lovely evening growing stiller as the wind went down, growing grayer as the burning fan

of gold and rose faded out of the radius of the sun. As they went they startled seagulls whose strange behaviour attracted her attention.

"They're catching toheroas," said Dane. "They watch for the air bubbles, and then they bore into the sand. They have to be awfully smart, for even the little fellows suck down amazingly fast. Then they fly up and drop them, and if the first fall does not break the shell they take it up again. Let's catch some. It will take you all your time to get a big one out."

They sat down together and soon saw the little bubbles of a creature coming under the surface to breathe. She dug fast with her two hands as the shell-fish sucked away from her spitting as it went. She had quite a tussle to get it out.

"I wonder if it feels any fear," he said.

"How queer it must be to have a blind instinct without consciousness."

"Well, a vast number of the human race have little else. Except for physical pain they have no vivid sense that anything is going on about them. They are no more alive than that—why, it has gone already."

"So it has." She gazed at a little patch of heaving sand. "Yes, I know what you mean. Beauty everywhere, and no eyes to see it. That struck me as a child. I remember once two of my old aunts sat on the verandah one glorious spring morning and fought about whether Queen Victoria had ever really appreciated Prince Albert or not; they gorged on details of the Royal Family, and they got so furious about it that they did not speak to each other for a week afterwards. I listened to them for a whole hour. There was the lovely garden and beds of flowers just beside them. And that's what they were doing! And I wondered why I was supposed to love and

respect those two awful old women who never saw the sun and never knew when it was spring. Oh dear! I'm talking too much. You must stop being such a good listener."

"Must I?" His eyes held hers for a minute. Then he stood up. And they went on to the gully.

She sat down on his narrow cot sniffing the smell of the canvas and the snug air of the tent. She took in the details of its spartan simplicity in a glance or two—the box cupboards, the plain kauri table, the rickety camp chairs, the few cooking utensils, the Chinese matting pressed over the uneven ground, the small typewriter, piles of books and papers, and socks and ties and clothes overloading a standard pole. Nothing less like the abode of a sybarite could be imagined. And he seemed strangely out of place in it as he moved about like an aristocratic cat, but feminine and feline only in his grace. She felt again there was nothing in his quality to suggest diluted masculinity.

"Will you have tea or wine?" he asked.

"Well, I would like tea."

"Good. Come on and carry some of these things out to the fireplace." He handed her various utensils, and then he filled a billy from a covered bucket.

Valerie's spirits rose with every minute. It is doubtful if there is a more friendly thing on earth than a picnic fire built to boil a billy for tea, and when it is tea for two it gathers a mysterious glamour as a human mob accumulates intensity.

And there never were two people more susceptible to any kind of enchantment than Valerie and Dane. They stood watching the smoke curl up into vanishing wisps among the tree tops and the shadows deepen about them. As he puffed contentedly at his pipe he reflected that a

fire must have been the first dissipater of loneliness in the days when a timorous humanity struggled with the beginnings of things, that the desire to dance must first have been stirred in the heart of man by the leaping of lambent flames, and that love as an art must have been begun by the warmth of glowing coals. Anyway, the sight of his fire and of Valerie sitting on a stump engrossed in it made him feel happier than he had done for some time.

He left her when the water began to hum and went in to set out the meal, leaving her to make the tea and bring it in. She saw the tent lit up with a lamp and his shadow moving like a grotesque on the wall. She felt very gay and alive.

He made no apology for the plainness of his food, for as he was going home the next day he had but remnants left. But Valerie never knew what she ate that evening. It was sufficient to eat with a man who had the air of presiding at a great feast.

"Ah, give me this any day before your satin couch civilization," she said, looking round soon after they began.

"You think you despise the satin couches, don't you? But what you really despise is the fact that they have been over-emphasized."

"But I do despise them. I love the primitive for its own sake. The satin couch world is cluttered up with a lot of unessentials, such a lot of meaningless stuff."

"There is meaning back of it. But the meaning has been obscured or perverted. You are the product of satin couches, even if you are a reaction against them. You would not appreciate this tent if you had not been brought up on satin. The primitive is fine for the nerves, but it is not stimulating to the modern mind. The caveman had a strong stomach but a poor imagination. It takes su-

premely sophisticated people to perceive the beauty of the simple life. No plebeian gumdigger sees the picturesqueness of a nikau whare. It's the man who comes from marble halls who does that. I can write inspired articles about the bush, but the man born in it can't. It's really because you had your grandparents that you love this. So don't despise that background."

He had come alive while he talked and his voice had deepened a little.

"I don't despise the best of it. But I do despise its assumptions," she retorted with spirit.

"My dear Miss Freedom, every class has its assumptions. Every race, clique, caste and set has had them all down the ages."

"Well, I dislike all assumptions then."

"What about your own?" His eyes flashed an amused challenge at her.

"Mine!" She glared at him. "Oh dear, have I any? That's one of the diseases I have been determined not to have."

"You have some about freedom, I think."

"Oh, of course you'd say that," she retorted. "But I know I'm only free comparatively."

He raised his eyebrows at her. "I gather you did not breathe easily in the Remuera set. May I ask if you find it less difficult in Dargaville?"

"I'm having nothing to do with Dargaville. I'm just living here for the work."

"H'm! You really mean to work, don't you?" He looked hard at her.

"Of course. Why not?"

He looked away from her without answering. It seemed to him that he was getting fresh impressions of her every hour.



"People aren't real, if they have not work," she went on eagerly. "That is one of the things I saw as I was growing up. I don't mean just a hobby. I mean work. It's wonderful what it does to people. Take all the ordinary people in our office. And Lizzie, that girl at Mac's who waits on me. It makes them originals, not imitations. And Mac, look at him. Something in his own right."

"Yes, you have the idea," he smiled. "Stick to it. I'm glad you can admire a man like Mac. You ought to see him in the bar. That is where he is really great. He broods like a gigantic puck over that motley crowd with a kind of puzzled expression, contemptuous and amused."

Dane talked on about him and the types of men about the river till they had finished. Then he produced a bottle of wine and they began to smoke.

"It's wonderful to have someone who understands," she said impulsively, after they had raised their glasses to each other. "I wish you could see how my relatives would look if I told them I admired people like Mac."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, you don't worry about them now, do you?"

"Not in the least. They're all dead."

He raised his eyebrows enquiringly.

She sat up talking eagerly, so much so that he wondered for a moment if the wine could have affected her so soon.

"You see, I killed them all years ago, all but dad. It was a grand scheme. I don't remember now how the idea came to me. But I made ghosts of them. I said to myself, 'Let them be like the furniture. There's a chair. It is an object. It can't hurt me. It is a dead thing.' And I began to imagine them dead one by one. And I learned what you could do with your imagination. Aunt Maud was my first ghost, because she was the worst. And then

it did not hurt me to see her any more, or to hear her nasty old tongue any more because she was only a pathetic spirit. And as it worked so well with her I killed them all in my mind. I appointed a day for them to die. I even wept over it for some of them, mother and Rose, because you see, I had cared, I had expected them to be things, and it was hard to come to see they would never be any different. But I had no peace with them alive, and so they all had to go. And then it was funny to see them come into a room. I used to say to myself 'How queer. There you are moving about as if you were a live thing. But you are just like the chair to me, and quite dead, because I don't expect anything of you any more.' And then, of course, I could be nice to them. For who would snub a ghost? And they all began to tell me how improved I was."

She stopped, for Dane had taken his pipe out of his mouth and turned his face to her, and there came out of his eyes a look that abashed her. "You're pretty ruthless, aren't you?" he said quietly.

Then to his surprise he saw her bite her lips, and a mist come over her eyes. "Oh, no, I'm not. All that hurt, really it did." And he saw the expression on her face that he had seen as she lay unconscious in the yard.

"I didn't mean to imply that you can't feel," he said quickly, seeing that he had hurt her.

"Why, I feel far too much!" she cried. "That is why I could not stand it. That is why I had to fight. That is why I had to kill them."

He put out a hand and patted her arm lightly. "I know. I understand."

She subsided at once, her face flushing up. "I'm silly to be so serious," she said, lighting another cigarette. A moment of awkwardness followed. Then Dane stood up.

"Well, you're only another poor mortal crying for the moon," he said lightly.

"And don't you ever cry for it?"

"Good Lord, my dear, sometimes it seems to me that I never do anything else. Come on, let's go out to the fire, and smoke there." As he spoke he took a sweater and a heavy coat off a hook, and collected tobacco, cigarettes and matches.

### III

When they had piled up sticks and logs and started a fine blaze, they sat down in the sand and rushes a little way above it. He had wrapped his coat about her and had put on his own red sweater. The light of the flames played about their faces and lit up their eyes. They sat still for a while and then she turned to him.

"You were born in Sydney, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"What kind of a family did you have?"

"I didn't have any except a father. That is, my mother died when I was born, and I was the first."

"No relatives! How joyful!"

He turned with the flash in his eyes that she was trying to encourage.

"That's the ironic part of it. Having none I always wanted some."

"Tell me about it. What did you do as a boy?"

"Well, I think I had a funny childhood, very irregular, but it had its interesting side." He picked up a piece of stick and threw it down into the fire, and talked on quietly and rather monotonously, quite without the reminiscencing fervour that Valerie had shown. "As a man my father was quite a character, but he was somewhat negligent as

a parent, indeed I may say he was a lamentable failure as a parent, and you can be under-fathered just as much as you can be over-fathered. But he was a great character. He was very handsome, much bigger than I am, and I get my colouring from him. He was on the stage as a young man, with Brough and Titherage, and then he met with an accident that badly lamed him. So they made him advance agent for the Brough Company, and he was with them till he died. He began taking me round with him when I was about six years old, and for years I travelled with him all over Australia and in Africa and India. He was very well known, fortunately for me, for as a kid I was a lot alone. I was really awfully lonely." He paused, putting down his pipe in the sand beside him. "I say, do you really want to hear this?"

"Oh, please, I do." She opened her eyes very wide at him.

"Well, my parent was not exactly fitted for the job. He used to forget about me. He'd leave me in a hotel in charge of a porter or anybody who happened to be around, and he would go off for days and nobody would care whether I ate or ever went to bed, and the porter might be sacked, and then there'd be nobody responsible for me. I used to hang round the bars and billiard saloons and drop asleep watching the play and listening to the tales. Eventually some man would find out who I was and go to the office about me, and somebody would come and wake me and tell me to go to bed. Sometimes I went to bed alone, but not often, I didn't like it. Occasionally there'd be a boy in the place I would take to, and like you, when I began to read it was much better. I didn't care much for roughing it then. I wasn't very strong physically, and I shrank from ordinary boy brutality. Well, I was always being left somewhere, and

then dad would miss something and remember me. Then there would come a telegram saying, 'Where's that kid of mine? Send him on by the eleven-thirty to-night with my clothes.' And often I would be roused out of bed and taken to a train and sent off to some town where, as likely as not, my father would forget to meet me in the morning. I was frequently lost. Once it was quite serious. That was in Africa. An Englishman found me asleep in a station in the early morning. He watched me a while and then woke me, and I told him my father was supposed to be there sometime. But I must have looked frightened or something, for he took charge of me, took me to breakfast and waited round with me all the morning. Then as dad never turned up, he left word at the station and took me off to his hotel. It took him three weeks to trace my casual parent who had been on a spree and in an accident. When he finally came there was a scene. The Englishman wanted to adopt me. He had had a boy who died. He was a huge chap, jolly and friendly. But my strange father had some queer affection of his own for me. He was always glad to find me again. He had an inextinguishable faith in the world's goodness to me. He always knew I would turn up, and I always did turn up. It was a tribute to his extraordinary personality and to the fact that he always paid his debts, that I was invariably given money and shipped along with his tooth-brush and the things he continually left behind. The only thing I ever quarrelled with him about was the stage. He wanted me to go on it, and trained me for it. But I could not stand it. I could not stand the women. And I wanted to write poetry. We had some trying arguments about it. But I was only eighteen when he died."

Dane took up his pipe again and refilled it.

"What did you do then?"

"Fortunately he left me enough money to go to London, where I'd always wanted to go. And there I looked up a sister of his, much older, unmarried. A pathetic, starved thing, as I see her now. She hugged his memory, and I let her hug it. She was living in a world of her own where all men were Saint Anthonys and Sir Galahads. And she made a Sir Galahad of me—well, I was one then. Poor soul, she got very dotty about me, but before I'd been there more than six months she died, and then I found she had left me her money."

"And what next?"

He smiled at this inquisition. "Let's see, I stayed on in London for a year, then I went to Paris and then to Berlin, and I rambled about Europe, and on into Persia and back to India and the East. It was the East that hypnotized me. Sometimes now I wish I had stayed there. But the climate worried me, and the life the Anglo-Saxon leads is pretty rotten, and I could not have kept out of it. I hankered after Sydney again too, and so I went back when I was twenty-four and began to write. I've run about the Islands and New Guinea and this country of yours since then, and, well, now I'm here."

He took a long puff and stared down into the fire.

"Yes here, after all that," she said slowly.

"Well, why not?"

"There must be so much you miss."

"Yes, and very glad I am to miss it."

"Do you intend to stay here?"

"I don't know. But I can consider it calmly. After all a book is a book, and a boat a boat, and a fire a fire all the world over. And then this business of being in the swim in London or Paris or New York is only another of the hypnotisms men succumb to to please themselves. It isn't as important to live in London as they think it is.

You can get behind humanity anywhere in the world. Every man in earnest wherever you go has the illusion that his particular ism or place is running the world. Each believes in the final dominancy of his set of ideas. Nothing gives you such a sickening sense of monotony as going about this world listening to men talk of their ideas. It makes you long for the good old days when nobody had any ideas beyond getting a meal and chasing a woman. In the course of a week's travelling you will meet twenty varieties of truths, each of which is the only thing that will save the world morally and industrially. And the fanatics talking these various truths are being pandered to and used everywhere by the same political and capitalist forces for the same old ends."

"But good heavens," she protested, "isn't there something more in the world than people talking about their ideas? Don't tell me you did not get a great deal more than that from travelling. You saw beautiful places, beautiful things."

"Yes, I know, and places are wonderful."

"Why, of course. Oh dear, you've had everything, just everything I want." She leaned forward staring hard into the fire.

"Well, you are going to get it, aren't you? You certainly will if you want it."

"Yes, I am," but she did not say it with her usual positiveness, and she felt a little chill that he should himself so cheerfully contemplate the idea of her going away.

Dane got up and went down to the fire and poked the straggling ends into the centre and put on another log. He stood there a minute beside it, a rather drooping figure vividly projected against a panel of darkness between the trunks of trees. She felt a swift clutch upon her heart as she looked at him. And she saw him against

the background of that wandering youth that he had so simply pictured. And she thought it was no wonder that he drank to excess occasionally. And then she wondered again if he made a habit of taking morphia. It startled her a little to see how much she cared about it.

Dane came back to her and sat down carefully beyond the reach of hands, as he had done before, and began to talk easily of his travels in the East. She listened fascinated to his impersonal account of men he had met, situations he had been in, and forces working in China and Japan. She had heard enough to be able to ask intelligent questions, and the time slipped by. It was he who thought of it first.

"What time do you have to be in?" he asked. "I mustn't keep you here too late."

She was not accustomed to men who considered the hours for her.

"Twelve o'clock. What is it now?"

"Nearly half-past ten."

"Oh, I'd better go. It's rather heavy walking."

She had a funny sense of frustration as he went into the tent to get a lantern. She wondered why. When he came out again he thought of the fire, and covered it up carefully, for the undergrowth about was still dry enough to catch. Then they set off into the sooty blackness of the ravine. There was something extraordinarily intimate about the compressed isolation of that little gully. It shut them off from the world as completely as if they were on a remote island. Ferns and creepers gave it a jungle fascination. The trees met so thickly overhead that not a starbeam twinkled through. The rumble of the surf was smothered to a distant monotone in the heavy stillness.

Valerie felt her pulses beating faster and faster, her



talk becoming more and more disjointed. Sensing the change in her Dane walked deliberately ahead of her, and quickly, fighting the temptation to stop and throw his arms about her. They recovered their equilibrium but not their spontaneity on the flat above. She had not expected him to go on with her, but he put out the lantern, leaving it by a bush, and started off with her. He lit his pipe and they went on some distance in silence. Then under the stars she lost her queer feeling of disruption and regained her poise. As far as she could feel he was oblivious of her as he swung along beside her.

After a while he asked her abruptly how she liked Roger Benton, and talking of him and his chances in the election they came to the borders of Dargaville.

"It was awfully good of you to give me your company," he said lightly, with no air of lingering, as he held out his hand.

"Yes, it's been a masterpiece of self-sacrifice."

She saw the smile that lit his eyes, and then he gave her a little salute and turned away. She walked on wondering if he had wanted to kiss her in the ravine, if the thought of kissing her had yet entered his mind. And then she told herself she must not think these things. She positively must not get fond of him. Feeling the way she did about a career and about living she had no business to encourage him. Then she thought she was absurd. He had given no sign that he had the remotest intention of looking upon her as anything but a passing acquaintance.

She passed Bolton and Allison gossiping by the former's gate and knew they looked curiously after her. She was glad to find the side door of the hotel still open, but as she slipped in quietly Mac came from the corridor with a candle to see if it were shut.

Because she had no conviction of sin Valerie never had the sense of being caught. She smiled up at Mac.

"That was a narrow shave. What would I do if it were locked?"

The big Irishman's hard eyes softened into the beginnings of a grin. She felt her soul was naked under that shrewd omniscient stare. But somehow it did not offend her.

"Knock on the window. Mike will let you in." He nodded in the direction of the room where Michael slept. He wondered in a vaguely interested way as she went on if she had been out with Dane Barrington.

She did not get to sleep for some time. Through her open window she caught at intervals on some drift of the night breeze the sound of the surf, and she pictured the man down there alone in his tent, and fell asleep to dream of a boy lost in a world of hotels and stations, a boy who kept running round corners after a man carrying a gigantic tooth-brush.

## CHAPTER IX

### I

**B**OB was generously astonished with what had been accomplished in his absence. When Valerie walked in at nine he sprang out of his chair with enthusiasm.

"Val, you are a brick. That job for Townshend is stroke. Benton will be awfully pleased. Looks as if he might be on our side. And that leader of yours on the fire is one of the best things I ever saw. Mrs. Benton read it to us last night."

"It was a good leader, wasn't it? But I didn't write it." She turned to the hook where she hung her hat and coat.

"You didn't! Why, Val, it wasn't quoted," he said and his tone implied that she had made a blunder.

"It didn't have to be, Bob. Mr. Barrington wrote it for me." She was sorry to see that heavy frown form over his eyes.

"Barrington wrote it! How the devil did he come to write it? Look here, Val, I don't want him to have anything to do with this paper, if you don't mind." He dropped down into his chair.

"Well, you can't stop him bringing in news, Bob. He's a friend of Benton's. He came in on Thursday night with that stuff about Lord Reaver's son and the fortune just as I was trying to write the leader, and I was most beastly ill with a headache, and he stayed and did it for me. Rather decent, I thought."

Bob was a bit ashamed of his reaction. Valerie said

down easily at her desk. "Did you have a good week?" she went on amiably.

"Oh, I suppose so."

But it was the middle of the day before he had recovered sufficient detachment to talk to her about it. He never made any reference later to the copies he saw of Dane's letter in other papers. Nor did Valerie mention them. She was above thinking that pin pricks serve any useful purpose in human relations.

A few evenings later she had to work in the office till nearly seven. Bob had left an hour before. When she entered the dining-room she saw there was no one at her table and only one man, a stranger, eating at that end of the room. She turned her head and saw that Dane was with Mac at the other end. To her surprise the big Irishman beckoned to her. As she approached his table she thought Dane's unmoved face a bit of unnecessary tact. But as she smiled at him she was surprised to catch no answering glimmer of responsiveness in his miserable eyes. The look in them chilled her before she could think.

"Come and have some pheasant," growled Mac hospitably. "I think you know Barrington." But there was nothing significant in his tone to suggest that he suspected there was something between them.

"I do. Yes, I'd love to," she said in one breath, trying to smile at Mac and look enquiringly at Dane at the same time. As she sat down opposite them her spirits rose a little at the sight of the steaming pheasants and the bottles of wine. As Michael brought extra service he smiled at her as if he were in a conspiracy with her.

She watched Mac carving deftly with his great red hands. She tried to appear as oblivious as he was of the frozen manner of the man beside him, but she wondered what on earth had happened to the gay spirit who had

made a feast of his crumbs in the tent, but could not now smile at the prospect of pheasant and champagne. He did not even look at her, but sat smoking a cigarette and staring at a corner of the table, his head a little bent, his shoulders hunched in an attitude of profound dejection.

Mac handed her a luscious plate of the best portions of a bird with potatoes and little onions, and Michael poured her out a glass of wine.

"Go ahead, eat," commanded Mac.

Then Dane looked at her, a faint glimmer of interest appearing at the back of his desperate eyes. He raised his glass to her and drank deeply.

She began to eat, for she was hungry, and she meant to pay Mac the compliment of enjoying his meal. "This is grand. I love pheasant high like this. Is there much game up this way?"

"Yes, about Kaihu. Can you shoot?"

"At a target, yes. But I don't like killing anything except rats."

Mac handed a plate to Dane and filled his own and began to gobble audibly. Then he looked at the other man who made no attempt to eat.

"Cheer up, D. B.," he said gruffly. "Heard of the accident?" He turned to Valerie.

"No. What is it?" Her eyes widened, and she looked from him to Dane.

"Duffield. Englishman. They brought him down from Townshend's mill an hour ago. Back broken." Mac said it as laconically as he would have said "He's got a cold."

Valerie put down her knife and fork while something caught her throat. "How rotten!" she exploded.

"Yes." Mac went on with his mouth full of food. "Bloody hard luck. Good sport. He's done."

She looked into her glass and without thinking drank it empty.

"That's it," said Dane bitterly, speaking for the first time. "That's the only answer." And he finished his own glass and refilled it.

"You knew him?" She turned her sorry eyes upon him.

"Yes, knew him well," he said irritably, and looked away from her.

"He's gone to the hospital, I suppose," she said to Mac.

"Yes. Lorrimer went too, with Doc Steele."

They all ate in silence for some minutes. Valerie felt depressed herself now. "I can never get used to accidents," she said gloomily. "Such a waste of human material."

"Plenty more to take its place, don't worry." Mac continued to eat with superb indifference.

Dane beckoned to Michael and ordered more wine. When it came he reached for her glass.

"Oh, please, not any more for me," she said quickly.

He shot a look at her. The champagne was working in him. "Be a sport. Of course you will have some more." He filled her glass.

Mac raised his, drinking for the first time. "Here's long life to you both," he said. It sounded as if he were proposing a matrimonial toast. Valerie compressed her lips, and a flicker of amusement crossed Dane's eyes.

"Not long life, Mac, but full life, eh, Miss Freedom?" And for the first time he looked at Valerie as if he really saw her.

She nodded, smiling at him as if she would make him forget.

Then Dane began to eat a little and to talk, and the

despair went from his face. He became alive, and she saw why her father had called him one of the finest table talkers he had ever met. As the wine got hold of him he grew more brilliant. He got on to reminiscences of the gold field rushes in Australia, to the tragedies and comedies of fever-stricken men and women. She listened astonished and fascinated, but chilled to think that he had to be a little drunk to be like that. But he had forgotten Duffield. At least she was glad of that.

Mac grew a little more lively too. He broke in with grunts and comments, and he forgot Valerie occasionally and let slip words with unpleasant connotations. Then she was surprised to see that Dane had not lost his awareness of her, for he silenced Mac with a commanding Sh! Interested though she was, she thought she had better leave them to it. She stood up and thanked Mac with a little bow. He grinned broadly at her.

Dane looked up at her with a subconscious appeal in his eyes, now softened and a little slumbrous. "Oh, don't go, don't go," he pleaded.

She did not want to. She had drunk just enough to make her reckless. But something told her she could not stay there and drink with them.

"I must go. I have to work," she said, and went off wondering if she were walking steadily. Unaccustomed to champagne she felt so fuddled when she got to her room that she lay down on her bed and fell asleep and did not wake till after midnight.

## II

The next evening as she walked with Bob to the office after dinner he told her that Dane Barrington had been drunk the night before and was still in bed in the hotel.

"I thought he probably was," she said sweetly. "I had dinner with him and Mac last night, and the fourth bottle was coming in as I left, or perhaps it was the fifth. I got a bit shickered myself and had to go to bed."

Bob stopped suddenly in the middle of the path, and then strode on belligerently.

"Out with it," she said calmly.

"I have nothing to say." But it was the tone of a man who could have talked all night on the subject.

"Really! You began by telling me something you suspected I would not like to know. Why be squeamish about the rest of it?"

"Val, if you are going to be associated with that man I'm going to leave Dargaville."

"That's not necessary, Bob. Sack me instead."

"Don't talk rot."

"Look here, Bob, calm down. The trouble is that you do not know me at all. Years ago you set up some vision and called it Valerie Carr. It never was Valerie Carr, and it never will be, and why on earth you want to keep on calling it Valerie Carr passes my comprehension. I've done my best as kindly as I could to show you I am not that vision. I did think I loved you and could marry you. I don't know what happened to make me see I couldn't. But I know something did. I'm willing to take the whole blame for that three months. I have never blamed you. But I couldn't go on, Bob. And one can never go back and begin again in the same way. You want something entirely different from me. You want a woman who will go your own road."

They had reached the office. He unlocked the door and they went in. Valerie did not take off her things. She sat on the edge of her desk looking at Bob, who had sat down and thrown his hat on to a pile of papers.



She struggled with something in her mind for a few minutes, then she went on quietly.

"Bob, we cannot work here with friction between us. You can have my resignation here and now, or you can play the game and shut up about what I do."

He turned fiercely on her. "You know as well as I do we can't bust up the job now. We've got to go on with it."

"It isn't any use telling me I have to go on with a thing. I tell you I will stay on one condition, and one only. And it was the one on which I came up. Are you going to keep it or not?"

"Oh, of course, I have to keep it. I always have to do everything."

"No, you don't. You simply have to choose between having me go or stay. And if I stay I'll never hurt your feelings by mentioning things I know you won't like to hear. If you think back over this conversation you will see you began that business. And you know quite well that when people hit me I can hit them back, and I'm always going to hit them back. I'm no meek and mild angel. But I do try not to give the first blow. The world is hard enough for all of us without that first blow."

As usual, Bob felt ashamed of himself. And he hated her awful fairness, her incorruptible strength, her fatal gift of hitting back in the sorest spot. He would have felt better if only he had known some weakness of hers he could make a dent in.

"Of course you must stay, and you can go to hell for all I care," he retorted savagely.

"Now that's the proper spirit. If only we would all let each other go pleasantly to hell the world would be quite a nice place to live in."

"All right. See that you let Barrington go pleasantly to hell if you get shook on him."

"Hell! Bob! Are you in a conspiracy to throw that man at me or what?" He had thrust better than he knew.

He was astonished to see her turn and go out of the office. He sat staring blankly at the wall in front of him for some minutes. Did she really care for that man? Up till now it had only been the fear that she might come to do so that had been in his mind. And if she did what was he to do? He dropped his head in his hands and thought back. And he knew he had no choice.

Valerie walked almost to the centre of the town in a rage against Bob. She told herself he had no business to hang on to a former relation in this manner. That was the kind of weakness that she loathed. Why could he not accept the inevitable? Just because she had never let him see how painful, how fraught with struggle and indecision the thing had been for her he had supposed she had not felt about it. And then that remark about Dane. She told herself she was not in love with Dane. He was not in love with her, and she detested this anticipatory settlement of her affairs.

She turned up Queen Street and walked to the fringe of the town and a little way on along the coast road. It was a cool windy night. But she found she was too upset to calm down all at once. She did wish Dane had not been so drunk as to be still in bed. She could not see how he could be any more sensitive than she to the tragedy in life. Much of her positive manner was due to the fact that she had to set her teeth on life or she could not have endured it herself. She stopped in the road and looked up at a black cloud that blotted out a part of the Milky

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Way. Then hardly knowing why she swung round and went back to the hotel.

She had not been in her room two minutes before there came a knock on her door. Michael stood there.

"Miss Carr," he began, with his ready sentimental smile, "there's a man in the house who would like you to play to him." He had the manner of a person who was continuously performing deeds that had to be disguised or hidden, and he infused a perfectly innocent proceeding with an air of furtive wickedness.

"Oh, is there? Then I shall be very glad to play." She tried to keep her voice casual.

She closed the door of the sitting-room behind her wondering if Dane were in one of the rooms next it. She knew one was Mac's. She knew afterwards that she had played deliberately, or that she had started deliberately to get hold of the man who was listening to her. Once lost in the music she forgot him, and he existed only as a subconscious stimulus. At the end of two hours she felt herself running down. She stopped and sat still on the piano stool half expecting some sign from him. But she heard nothing, and disappointed went back to her room. Under her door she found a note in a sealed envelope. In the middle of the folded piece of paper was written, "Thanks, Miss Freedom, for a golden hour in a leaden day."

It was one of those fragments in the development of a human relation that have a significance invisible to the casual eye. Valerie could not have torn it up or put it in the waste-paper basket. On the other hand she had not reached the exuberant stage when she wished to kiss it or put it in a scented sachet. She studied the nervous writing for a minute, and then folded it up and put it in a little tin box with a copy of her will, some receipts, some

old photos of herself and Bob and her father on the yacht, and other miscellaneous things which for one reason and another she wished to keep.

Then she sat down on her bed and stayed very still for some time. She recognized some kind of crisis in her life. It had come to her in the office when she offered her resignation to Bob. Something inside her said "Now or never." And she wondered how many people in the history of relationships acted on the "Now."

### III

"Have you had a hard week? You seem tired." Father Ryan looked solicitously at Valerie as she sat down to dinner.

"I'm more cross than tired. I haven't slept well the last night or two. And life makes me so cross sometimes. There's poor Duffield still alive. Why, why, when he has to die? Why is nature so brutal?"

The little priest waved his soft hands. "We have to leave all that."

"I've noticed that most of us do leave it," she retorted.

"What are you going to do to-night?" he asked after a minute's silence.

"Nothing in particular. That is, I was going for a ride."

"Would you like to come with me to the hospital and play to the patients? I have to see a man there who is very ill with pneumonia. There is a piano there seldom used. I think they'd like some music."

"Yes indeed I will. Will the matron let me play at night?"

"Yes, I'm sure it will be all right. It's in the accident ward."

Valerie had never been in a public hospital, and when she walked into the long ward with the night nurse she got a funny gulp in her throat, and a sense of the vast areas of human experience that had so far been unknown lands to her. She was struck silent by the piteousness of the two rows of white cots and the shapeless lumps that lay under the white quilts. The ward was always full, for this was the only hospital on the river. There were all kinds of heads and faces projected sharply against the pillows. Some turned as they walked in and others, gripped by a benumbing indifference to the things of earth, lay still. She saw that three beds had screens round them, and wondered what stricken things lay there to be hidden away from the rest. She was glad she was to sit with her back to them. She felt she could never have played if she had had to face them.

She dug out of her memory the things she thought her varied audience would like, cheerful things, happy songs and dances, and a little sentimental music to stir the pulses of the dreamers. She had asked the nurse to stop her when it was advisable, but no one stayed her hand. At last her mood began to break. Something began to distract her. She finished rather abruptly a waltz by Brahms and turned on her stool. Half-way down the ward, sitting with the nurse, she saw Dane Barrington. She stood up and they came towards her.

"Oh, will you sing?" she said impulsively to Dane.

He gave her a black look. "Sing! Good God! How could I sing here?"

She felt chilled at once at the pain in his eyes. But she resented his suffering.

The nurse thanked her eloquently and moved off to a man who had beckoned to her.

"Are you riding?" asked Dane.

"Yes. I came up with Father Ryan."

"Oh. Do you have to go back with him?"

"I don't have to, no."

They looked at each other. Something came out of him and clutched at her.

"Then I'll tell him I'm taking you back."

"All right, but I have to have supper with Miss Addison first."

"Well, that's all right. I've only just come. I'm going to sit with Duffield for a while. I'll wait for you at the stable." He moved off with the air of a man who dreads with every nerve in his body what he is about to do, and disappeared behind one of the screens.

The hospital superintendent, Miss Addison, thought Valerie rather absent-minded as they took supper in her pleasant little sitting-room. And Valerie, on her side, was staggered at the apparent calmness with which the matron told her that there were three people in the building who could not possibly live a week.

#### IV

Dane was pacing back and forth beside the stable when she went out. He stood still when he saw her and waited for her to come up to him. He felt her life and vitality and sympathy reaching out to him. It enfolded him like a warm and gracious garment on a cold day. He made an impulsive movement and seized her hands.

"Oh, man, how can you live if you suffer like this about people?" she said, and in spite of herself a shade of criticism crept into her tone.

His raw nerves recoiled from it at once.

"Good God! You go and sit by that man and look into his eyes as I have been doing. He can't talk except with his eyes, and he is putting the despairing questions

of ages into them. I tell you if you looked at them long you'd go mad. If it is easy for you to forget the God-damned mess and mystery of all this it isn't for me." He flung her hands away and stamped off to the stable.

Valerie bit her lips and looked up at the impotent stars so brilliant in the clear May night that they silvered the river running below. For the first time in her life she had not the faintest idea what she was going to say next, what she could say next to comfort this man. It was all very well for her to feel deep within herself that the only answer to him was to antidote tragedy with beauty, death with life. How was she to say it and not be cheap and banal? She was feeling strained and uncertain when Dane led the horses out.

"I'm sorry I was rude, Miss Carr," he said, as he stopped before her.

She had a wild impulse to throw her arms about him as he stood with his head a little on one side looking at her.

"You were not rude," she said softly.

She let him help her to mount, and she put her hand on his shoulder with a significant pressure. They rode in silence out of the hospital grounds and along the road by the river. She stole looks at him as he kept his horse abreast of hers. He had a tweed cap tilted back on his head that gave him a curiously rakish look as it pressed his hair out round his white face. She wondered why he wanted her company for he did not seem aware of her at all. But she had no desire to clutch at his reserves. She looked up at the stars and tried to think her own thoughts.

About a mile from the hospital he pulled up his horse. He looked up a scrub-covered slope to their left. He seemed to find something.

"Are you in a hurry?" he asked.

"No."

"There's a track off here to the coast. Will you ride out there? I don't want to go home. I don't want to be alone."

"Of course I will."

He led the way up a rough incline covered with low ti-tree and broken by small washouts. Then they came out upon the plain where there was a maze of old tracks partly overgrown and often treacherous. They went slowly, for he missed the way every now and then and they had to go back and pick it up again. The air was keen and salty, with a light night wind rustling about the bushes. The sound of the surf advanced and receded as they twisted and turned.

Valerie lost the sense of her own identity, and it was not till Dane pulled his horse up at the head of the ravine, and she saw the dull line of the surf below, that she came back to herself and him.

He had been lost too, groping in a great blankness of pain and despair, but instinctively feeling his way to a little glimmer of light, impulsively following its little flicker, thinking of the moment when he might get to it.

"Shall we go down?" he asked, turning to look at her, as she sat straight and tense on her horse.

"Of course, if you'd like to."

She wondered if he still had the tent. They trusted to their horses to steer them safely through the Cimmerian darkness of the gully, for they could see nothing till the dull white shadow of the cottages showed through the trees on the open lower level. When they came opposite the Bentons', which was nearest to the beach, Dane stopped again.

"Would it be too cold for you to sit out a while? I have coats and things in the tent."

"No, I never catch cold."



As he led the horses to Roger's stable she remembered that it must be after midnight. But the next day was Sunday. And then her morality had never been regulated by the position of bits of steel on a clock's face.

He came back to her and led the way into the tent and lit a candle.

He took a warm coat off his pole and helped her into it, and put on his red sweater, and pulled a rug off his cot. He led the way to a hollow half-way up the side of the cliff where they could look down upon the surf. He sat down beside her and wrapped the rug about their feet and knees, took out his pipe and began to smoke. He forgot to offer her a cigarette.

She waited a little and then asked him for one. He came to her out of a far-away mood and looked at her almost in surprise. Then he was smitten with a quick remorse for his discourtesy.

"Lord! I'm sorry. Miss Carr, I'm behaving very badly. Why, I forgot you were there, that is, I knew you were there, but—hang it, how can I say it?" His tone showed that he was less tragic than he had been when they started out from the hospital.

"You don't have to say it. I understand," she said eloquently. "You are really paying me a great compliment."

He held up the rug enclosing them in an intimate snugness while she lit her cigarette. But his suffering had gone much too deep to be lightened all at once. As he smoked on he retreated from her into his own thoughts.

Valerie leaned back a little against a thick clump of rushes so that she could look at his figure bent forward, his hands clasped about his knees, his face turned from her sometimes staring straight out over the black sea, and sometimes raised to the sky. There was something

about the way he sat, about the forlorn droop of his shoulders, the set of his head upon them, that made her mad to throw her arms about him and pull him back into a live warm world. She relentlessly fought these impulses, the most powerful she had ever known, because she was so uncertain about him. She had not the faintest idea how far, if at all, he had committed his feeling to her.

Suddenly he swung round to her, taking his pipe from his mouth. He adjusted the rug which he had disarranged.

"You know, I was just wondering how far the human race might have got without words. Individuals can get on quite well without them. I got an amusing picture of everybody going about in a great silence, smiling, pointing, making signs, very restful, eh?"

"Why"—she was dislocated out of her own mood, "we shouldn't have got very far with art, invention, all that we call civilization, should we?"

"We might have developed some other kind of civilization, a better kind. We haven't done so much after all. We've learned a lot about comfort, something of beauty. We have learned to save life from some of its diseases, and words have been instrumental in spreading information about those things, yes." He looked up at the sky a moment and went on as if he were talking to himself. "How little we have done after all. We can't make a fine human being, the test, the real test. Nobody knows what will produce a Confucius or a Cæsar. They just happen. Our great men are accidents, produced by so frail a chance that it is astonishing to contemplate it. The moods and senses, forced or spontaneous, of a couple of people with no notion of producing a hero, a fortuitous collaboration of passion and circumstance and a fragment of life force, and behold! a great man results. What a

joke! And not a person in all history has ever contributed a practical idea as to the making of him. Some people think health does it, some think education, some think the Bible, some think matching a tall fair man with a short dark woman, some think breeding, some think free love. And what is the result of all those theories? The same uncertainty everywhere. And often with the more breeding there is the poorest result, and with the more chance the better. Out of nowhere comes a Lincoln and out of aristocrats an idiot!"

He dropped his head on to his knees a moment.

"And then when you get the best that we can do, it is a specimen tragically fragile and incomplete, so easily maimed and broken, and so pathetically helpless with his own kind. Numbers of our cleverest men can do wonders with anything but themselves. Men who can paint splendid pictures are often dirty, offensive, bedraggled human beings eternally suffering from indigestion, men who can compose glorious music are half mad and full of childish vanity, men who can write great books are mean-spirited, nervous persons who fly into a rage at the sight of one man's adverse opinion, men who can lead armies to victory are afraid of their mothers-in-law, men who can build magnificent bridges and govern empires are putty in the hands of their mistresses ——"

Valerie laughed out, throwing up her head.

"Well, isn't it a spectacle?" he demanded, almost fiercely.

"Yes, it is."

"Do you think there's any system at the back of it all?"

"I feel there ought to be. But I don't know."

"I get so tired thinking about it," he said, drooping again.

She put out her hand and buried her fingers in the hair on the back of his bowed head.

He turned to her at once, and throwing an arm about her, grasped hers on the further side of him with a hot and nervous clutch. He nosed his face into her neck so that his hair tickled her cheek. And then he lay still, like a tired child, sure of its resting place.

Valerie drew a long breath and then exerted all her will power to drive back the excitement that heaved up inside her. She knew that Dane was not at that moment thinking of her as a woman at all. She had no illusions as to the possibility of his being a blazing and imperious lover when he was moved. But he was not a perennial dribbler of sensation, and something, she could not tell what, was holding him back.

So she sat very still herself, keeping her free hand away from his head, and trying to give him just the comfort of a presence that she felt he wanted. She tried to hold on to the sensation that the nestling of his head in her neck gave her. After a while he sat up suddenly, ran his hands through his hair, and looked for his pipe which he had put down in the sand.

Then he turned to her. "I say, I haven't any business to be keeping you out like this. It must be very late. I'm very selfish."

She felt an intense irritation, what at she did not know, and then she felt cold.

"Why, I'm not a child," she said, with just a touch of sharpness in her tone. She sat up conscious again of a sense of frustration.

He filled his pipe slowly and began to smoke. It had grown cold and feeling it now she shivered. Dane got to his feet and held out his hands to her. She felt he was conscious of her drifting experimental mood, and that for

some reason he was fighting it and managing it. It embarrassed her and made her feel crude and undignified. And that made her angry at him. He walked ahead of her to the tent and threw in the rug. Then he helped her off with his coat and after pulling off his own sweater looked at his watch.

"Good Lord! It's two o'clock! How will you get into the hotel? I'll go there with you and——"

"You don't have to, my dear man. What kind of babe do you think I am? I'll knock on Michael's window. Mac told me to."

He peered curiously at her in the starlight.

"Of course," she said. "I asked him what I would do if I was out after midnight."

Then she saw his face light up against the dull white tent wall.

"You are very nice and unafraid, Miss Freedom, aren't you?" he said softly, and turned along the path to Roger's stable.

They rode in silence through the ravine and for some way along the flat above. They were more uncomfortable with each other than they had ever been. Valerie knew that she had intended Dane to kiss her down there, and the fact that he had not done so made her look foolish in her own eyes. But the thing that disturbed her much more was the fear that he had sensed her intention. This fear froze her into a complete detachment from him as she rode beside him.

At the borders of Dargaville he stopped.

"You have been very kind to me to-night, Miss Carr, very kind. Now are you sure you're all right?"

She was absurdly hurt again all at once. "Oh, I haven't been kind," she said impatiently, "and I'm quite all right, thank you." She held out her hand.

As he took it and gripped it firmly he looked at her and seemed about to speak. But instead he leaned down over her hand and pressed a kiss upon it, and swinging his horse away from her, rode off.

Valerie could not have told whether it was a town or a forest she rode on through, for she saw nothing of it. A fierce excitement burned through her, making her a little sick with the stress of it.

When she reached her room she threw up her window at the bottom, drew her chair to it, and sat down. Her thoughts swirled about in her mind for some time, and out of the swirl emerged a few well-defined certainties. She had wanted Dane to kiss her. She was falling in love with him. She wanted to fall in love with him. She wanted him to love her. But he drank. Perhaps he took morphia. He was a strange and difficult person. She did not understand him. And then the question, What was she going to do about it? And the questions, Did he care for her? If not, could she make him care? What was it that halted him every now and then?

She had not found any answer when at last she fell asleep.

## CHAPTER X

### I

DANE had not ridden more than a quarter of a mile away from her when he pulled up his horse and turned off in a northerly direction. He crossed the Kaihu road and found his way down to the river road leading to his home.

He could not put Valerie out of his mind, and he knew now what he was coming to with her. He knew he could not be with her again, as they had been down in the sand-hills, without kissing her. He was not in love with her yet, but he wanted to be in love with her. He wanted her to make life vivid and positive again, just once, just once more. She had made him painfully aware of his loneliness.

And yet he had sworn that never again would he become mixed up with any woman. For a man who loved women it was an absurd resolve, and he had as he rode now a full sense of its absurdity. And then, Valerie was different from all the women he had known. She stood apart. She seemed fine and sincere. But he knew it was not her character that attracted him. What did a man ever think about a woman's character? He ought to emphasize it, but he never did. No, it was her vividness, her vitality, the suggestion of softness and allurements deep within her, the tones in her voice when she lowered it, her mischievous desirous eyes and her tantalizing mouth; these were the things about her that beguiled him.

He pulled his horse to a standstill on the hill above his house. He often paused there to look down upon it. It gave him a feeling of peace. He loved to come back to its scented splendour after the dry bareness about the tent. These contrasts intensified his sense of life. He wondered what it would be like to have Valerie there filling the house with her music. He could see himself lying in the hammock listening.

He rode down and went in, hushing his dogs. He slept better than he expected and woke to a fine cool late May day. He ate his breakfast outside and settled down in his hammock afterwards to smoke. But he could not keep his thoughts on the thing he had meant to write.

He kept seeing Valerie, not as he had seen her the night before, but as he had seen her the first time in the office, and then again as she lay unconscious in the yard. And he wondered if she were seriously interested in him. He never over-emphasized the importance of sentimental moods. It did not occur to him that because she had put her hand on his head the night before it was an indication that she was in love with him. He knew now she was not the child he had first thought her. She had probably been kissed by many men.

Well, what of it all? He had not followed all his impulses with her. Something had held him back. A tangle of inhibitions, indeed. He could not tell which of them was the stronger, but he thought of Davenport Carr first. He knew well enough what that social autocrat would think of his association with his daughter in any way whatsoever. And he was deeply indebted to Davenport Carr. And he simply must keep away from his daughter.

And if he went on how would it end, anyway? Just as it had always ended. With him love had always destroyed itself. And he felt he could never hold Valerie. She was



set for so much more in life than love. For one thing, she would never stay here with him by the river. And he would want to stay by the river.

He thought back over his life. He knew he had packed into fifteen years the intensities that stronger men spread over forty. He had lived with a reckless disregard of health or old age. He had never seen any good reason for living long, for living past the summit of one's powers. He loathed the thought of a nerveless, loveless, ravaged old age, and so he had flung roses riotously with the throng till he had broken down. Then, forced to face alternatives, to estimate his spiritual assets and liabilities, he had been surprised to find that he cared to live on a basis of revaluation. He laid most of the world away, and came back to concentrate his forces on his work and on such beauty as he could find there within reach of his old place.

And he told himself that he, a clouded and despairing spirit, had no business to snatch at the brightness of untarnished youth going by, had no business to impose the moods and habits of a reckless life upon the fine hope and gaiety of a purposeful one. He saw it all very clearly that May morning.

The next day it turned cold and rained and there followed a week of early winter weather that depressed him. He did not go into Mac's at all. It was too cold to enjoy his launch. After two bad nights he came to a decision. He ordered his tent and its belongings brought home. He packed into chests and locked up the smaller and more valuable of his things, and leaving his boys as he had before to look after them and his house till he should return, he slipped away to Auckland and to Sydney for the winter. He knew what he was doing. For the first time in his experience he was running away from life.

## II

He was gone for nearly two weeks before Valerie knew it. She had thought of him a good deal in the wet days following the night on the sand-hills, and supposed he was keeping in out of the unpleasant weather. She had spent her idle moments speculating as to what turn their next meeting would take. Then in a letter from her father she learned that he had lunched with Dane the day he left for Sydney. She was hurt and angry, without reason, as she admitted to herself. He was in no way committed to telling her of his doings. And then she began to wonder if he had run away from her, and why.

But as the days went by she had less and less time to indulge in her own thoughts. She was drawn and willingly enough into the burning issues of that memorable campaign when the old Liberal Party that Dick Seddon led triumphantly into battle and victory for fifteen odd years crumbled before that mysterious force in the world that brings about a change. The little office became a more strenuous place than ever. Two local girls had been added to the typesetting staff. One of the book-keepers from Roger's store had been transferred to help Valerie for half his time. The jobbing work was mounting up every day. As Bob was away a good deal now with Roger, the running of the office single-handed was a considerable job for Valerie. She now began at eight in the morning, and was often there till ten at night. But she revelled in these swift days, and had many a thrill over obstacles overcome. She was a person who was warmed by many fires and able to make many burn for her. She got increasing pleasure out of the devotion of Jimmy and Miss Hands, and out of the coöperation of Roger's com-

mittee. She even discovered likeable qualities in Bolton and Allison, who were at least devoted backers of their political party, and able to admire the work she was doing for it. Her favourite on the committee was the lawyer, George Rhodes, who was doing fine work digging into the past history of the enemy and bringing into the clear light of day the things it most wished to have buried forever. But Valerie liked working with all of them. She liked the mysterious change that was wrought in people who were working for a common cause, the sense of fraternity that developed among them.

But even in this exhilarating hustle the thought of Dane lay slumbrous ever at the back of Valerie's mind, and when at the end of five weeks she got a letter from him she was amazed at the feeling it roused in her. It came to the office with the mail from the steamer about five o'clock, but when she saw it was seven closely written pages she had to put it aside till she should be finished for the day. And that was not till half-past ten that night. Then by the light of two candles she read it in her room. It was a delightful letter, intimate and impersonal, saying nothing and everything. And it filled her with questions as to what she was going to do with herself and him when he came back.

As he had given her no address she wondered if he were about to return, but at the end of a week she wrote to him care of the *Sydney Bulletin*, wrote as impersonally as he had written to her, of the progress of the campaign and the humours of the day. Then she began to look for the Australian mail, but she heard no more of him till, well on in August, Father Ryan mentioned casually one morning at breakfast that Dane had been a passenger with him on the steamer from Auckland the day before.

## III

Late one afternoon in the last week in the month Dane sat playing and singing to himself in his study. He had on a dull red lounging robe and gay soft slippers. Behind him at the end of the room a log fire was burning low, the intermittent flames casting spurts of light across the polished case of the piano, and glittering for a second on brass candlesticks and picture glass. There were no other lights in the room.

This had been the parlour of the old mission station, but when Dane had reconstructed the house he had extended it by some eight feet, so that it was now roomy enough to contain without overcrowding a varied collection of furniture, in spite of the fact that the entire available wall space was given up to shelves of books. Against the front window, which he had had widened for the sake of light, stood an old Italian table and cabinet, the former littered with manuscript paper, a bronze ink set of curious English workmanship, a jade brush pot full of penholders, an enamel jar for tobacco, a carved red lacquer cigarette box, several pipes, a pile of paper-backed French novels, some disreputable pieces of blotting-paper, and a little ivory box in which he kept stamps. The chair here was Italian, remodelled with a soft seat of old tapestry for comfort.

There were several tables, English and Italian, littered with books, and a fine old English oak chest standing at the end of the piano. Before the fire were two chairs of the low leather smoking-room variety, and near one of them a table covered with smoking apparatus. Above the bookshelves which did not go beyond six feet up the walls were water colour and oil sketches, and black and white

drawings by Australian artists. Among them were two heads of Dane himself, one the much-reproduced pen and ink drawing by Norman Lindsay, a wonderful piece of work, and a fine sketch in oils by Sid Long.

The one French door opening onto the verandah, and the front window were curtained with silken stuff, the colour of burnished copper, which carried on the tint in the unpolished rimu walls. There were brilliant spots of colour here and there along the tops of the bookshelves in bits of Chinese porcelain, and there was colour in three Persian rugs on the floor, and in the books, but after coming out of the other this looked a very quiet room, and in spite of its diverse objects it was a homogeneous whole.

Dane lifted his hands from the keyboard on hearing his dogs bark outside.

"Mr. Benton coming in," said Lee from the doorway.

"All right. Bring him in here."

Rather glad of a diversion he got up and turned to meet Roger, who came in mud-spattered as from a long ride.

"Heard yesterday you were back, Barrington. I'm pretty grubby." Roger looked doubtfully at his elegant host and at the room, now coming to light, as Lee lit lamps and candles.

"You won't hurt anything. Sit down." Dane indicated one of the leather chairs, and took the other himself.

"How's the campaign going?"

"All right till yesterday, curse it!"

"What happened yesterday? I haven't been in to the town for days."

"Lorrimer went to the hospital, down with pneumonia."

Dane looked into the light of the match he had just lit. "That's hard luck, certainly," he said sympathetically.

"It's the very devil," said Roger gloomily.

Lee came through the door with a tray and put it on a small table.

"Wine or whisky, Meester Benton?"

"Whisky; yes, some water, thanks."

"Meester Barrington, what for you?"

"Whisky, please."

When the boy had gone out Roger went on. "He was doing fine in the electorate, popular everywhere, and sending good stuff to the paper. Now it will be a month at least before he is fit for anything. Miss Carr can run the office all right. She's a wonder, that girl. But she can't do the leaders and the political stuff."

Dane looked hard into the fire. "What kind of a start have you made?"

"Quite hopeful, I think. In fact, I've been surprised at some of the places support has come from. Of course we have the farmers. They have always been for Massey. But it looks as if we might get some of the transient vote, the gumdiggers, bush fellers. There's a change in the feeling, talk of the swing in the country to Massey, and it is a good thing to cultivate. I know I'll carry most of Dargaville, and there's never been anyone who could do that before. Mobray, of course, will carry Te Koperu. But I find he's more unpopular than I thought he was."

"Still he will be a hard man to beat. And what about the prohibition issue?"

"That's the devil of it. It isn't certain yet whether Dodge will stand. If he does, the damned fool, he will split the votes, and then nobody can guess the result. If it is clear cut between Mobray and me I've a fighting chance ——"

"Then, my dear Roger, Dodge must be bought. Has anybody thought of that?"

"Well, yes. I've put Rhodes on to it. But Dodge is a slippery customer."

"The more slippery he is the more certain it is that he will stand to be bought. Name a figure and don't budge from it."

"Yes, that's the idea, I know. And with him out that leaves us both liquor men. I've been approached to stand for prohibition, but I'd lose more than I'd gain by that."

Dane smiled at him. "No labour man mentioned?"

"No. I wish there were. He'd draw from Mobray, not me. Barrington, I wonder if you could find out where Townshend stands. He's given us his jobbing, but I don't lean on that. He's always been for Mobray, but he's been very amiable to me since I came out. Only he won't talk politics, and that's a bad sign. He holds the election in his hands if his men are solid."

"They won't be solid."

"No, that's the funny part of politics in this country. You can't count on anything."

"That looks as if the voters did a little thinking. What is your war cry? Justice for the North?"

"Yes, and it's the best we could have. It's high time the Government paid some attention to us. Seddon never did, and neither has Ward. They have lived for the South. And we mean to see that if Massey gets the lead he will take some notice of us up here. If I get in for Waitemata, and Haines gets in again for Marsden, and Sloan goes in for the Bay of Islands, we can do more than talk about the main trunk line and the opening up of the North."

"Yes, you really have an issue, Roger. I was amazed at the possibilities of the North when I went over it, and at the little that had been done for it. Not a decent road anywhere. And it has the finest climate in the country.

Well, here's your chance, old man. You will go down in history as the man who made the Government make the North, that is, if you don't get swallowed up like the rest of them."

"Indeed, I will not," retorted Roger with a fine show of decision.

Dane smiled at him again, but the other man subsided gloomily.

"Well, I'm not in. If labour is solid against me I won't get in. And now with Lorrimer ill—curse it!" He stared into the fire.

In the pause that followed Dane wondered if they were both thinking the same thing.

Roger turned abruptly to him. "I say, Barrington, would you help us out with leaders and some articles? You can have any price you want."

Dane felt the hand of fate upon him. Why ever run away from life when it was the relentless tracker it was? But he turned quiet eyes upon the instrument of the gods.

"I'll think about it, Benton. But I don't want any price. I don't need the money. You will go on paying Lorrimer, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, yes, of course. But will you really do it, Barrington? I would prefer to pay——"

Dane waved his hand at him. "It's not a question of money at all. I'd like the fun of being in the game. And my knowledge of the North would be useful. Are you going to be around to-morrow?"

"Yes, I have a conference with the committee in Dargaville in the morning. By God, Barrington, do say you will get in on it." There was no mistaking Roger's anxiety in the matter.

"I'd like to think about it to-night a little. I would go in under Miss Carr, of course. I've no desire to run



the *News*. The idea is that I would simply send in the stuff?"

"That's it."

"I'll tell you definitely in the morning, Benton, how much I will do. You can count on me for something, anyway."

"By Jove, Barrington, I am grateful to you. But I really do not wish to impose on your good nature."

"My good nature ——" Dane looked past him at Lee who stood in the doorway signalling with his eyes. "Will you dine with me, Benton?" he added.

"Oh, thanks, no, I can't. Is it as late as that?" He got to his feet. "I must be getting along. Don't get up, old chap. You look darned comfortable down there." Roger beamed upon him almost affectionately.

But Dane did get up, and led the way through the hall to the front door.

"See you in the morning then, at the store. Will eleven suit you?"

"Admirably. Good-night."

Roger clinked down the front steps feeling he had been very clever. If he could only secure Dane for the *News* he knew he would have the most potent and penetrating pen the elections would know.

Dane paced back and forth on his front verandah till his dinner should be ready. He paused now and then to look up at pallid gray clouds gathering density every minute in a bottle-green sky that was clearing a little after rain. Mingling with the mist that rose from the soaked earth he felt for the first time the stealthy approach of invisible things feeling their mysterious ways towards birth and their little measure of the spring. From the delicate tassels fringing the ferns by the river up to the dusted fresh green of the kauri saplings on the skyline another

surge of life was vibrating all about him in the dusk. The night was closing down on an air sweetened with the violets and jonquils and primroses that carpeted the shaded recesses of his garden. It was all very lovely. And he felt unaccountably happy and unaccountably sad.

Then Lee called him and he went in.

#### IV

Valerie had been deeply concerned when after a week's absence Bob walked into the office looking gray and ill. He threw a packet of notes and manuscript on her desk and said he must get to bed. It was eight o'clock, and she begged him to get the doctor as soon as he got to the hotel. But when she got home at eleven, after going over his papers, she found he had not done anything for himself. Alarmed by his appearance she had Michael hunt up Doc Steele, who had left the house an hour before. The doctor stayed by Bob most of the night, and the first thing in the morning ordered his removal to the hospital. He was wrapped out of sight in rugs and run down in one of Mac's launches. While it was still dark Valerie went to the house of the postmaster and woke him. If she could get on the line with Auckland at once Mrs. Lorrimer might be able to get that day's boat. The official managed it for her, and she got the Bishop's family out of bed.

She tried to eat a breakfast that might be adequate for the day she knew was ahead of her. She got sandwiches from Lizzie to take to the office, foreseeing that a lunch time might be merely a matter of imagination. It proved, indeed, to be one of those days when capricious circumstances collaborate to drive mortals mad. For some reason the minds that decided the allotment of cables and telegrams to little papers almost doubled her usual allow-

ance. There was a bad accident up the line about which conflicting accounts were received every hour. The committee dropped in unexpectedly in the morning to be uselessly sympathetic about Bob, and she had to tell them as good-humouredly as she could that they had more time to think about him than she had. The printing press chose the occasion to break down in the middle of the afternoon just as the paper was going on, and Valerie had to leave the situation and run, when she heard the steamer whistle, to meet Mrs. Lorrimer, who had sent a telegram to say she was on the way. She had to forget the work while she tried to comfort Bob's anxious mother. She had a buggy ready for her, and explained as kindly as she could why she could not possibly go on to the hospital with her, seeing perfectly well that Mrs. Lorrimer did not believe a word she said. Back to the office she went to meet an up-river man who wanted quotations on prices for a large job. He had been sent by Townshend. From half-past five to half-past six she read the benumbing pages of a spring show catalogue. She hurried home, took a hot bath, tried to make her mind a blank for a quarter of an hour, and went down to dinner feeling as if she had been through a war. Fortified by a bottle of wine from Mac, she ate a restrained meal and went back to the office to work till eleven.

The second day was an excellent likeness of the first, except that it was the jobbing machine that broke down instead of the printing press, and that, in addition, one of the girls was away ill. Again she ate her lunch in the office as she edited the cables. And the rushed day was coloured throughout by the news that Bob had a temperature of 104 and was at death's door.

At six o'clock Valerie dropped back in her chair and went limp. The staff had gone and only Jimmy was to

come back that night to help her on the catalogue proofs. Somehow they had cleaned up the formidable pile of the morning. Everything had got into the paper. But what was to be done about the leaders? Roger had left her half an hour before saying they would have to get somebody from Auckland. She had resented that idea. She did not want a stranger there. Curiously enough, though she knew Dane was back, and though a part of her intensity was due to the fact that she kept expecting him to appear without warning, it never occurred to her that he might be the way out.

She gave herself a little more time for dinner that night, and found Jimmy, as usual, waiting for her. They had been reading proofs for about an hour when a noise in the composing-room disturbed them.

"Sounds like a rat, Miss Carr," whispered Jimmy excitedly. He got up and stole to the composing-room door. They had had two rat hunts in the place that winter and the sport had proved absurdly thrilling.

"Yes, miss," hissed Jimmy in a loud whisper. "A big one; I saw it."

Valerie bounded out of her chair, forgetting for the moment that Bob might die that night. She darted after Jimmy and closed behind her the composing-room door.

## V

Dane ran his launch into the bank opposite the *News* office, and anchored it in the fringe of rushes where he could step out a foot or two from the path. He swung across the street, tapped on the door, opened it and went in. Over the counter he saw Valerie's hat and coat hung on a corner nail. But he could see nobody. Then he heard the extraordinary sounds that were proceeding from

behind the closed door. He listened in a startled amazement. His first thought was that somebody was being murdered.

"Now's your chance! Get him! Oh, golly, missed him! Now here! There you are! Oh crums! Look out! He's getting fierce!" These words were hurled about in tones of bloodthirsty fury by a hoarse voice he did not know, and then came shouts from Valerie. "Go it, Jimmy. Oh, you idiot! That was easy."

Dane could curb his curiosity no longer. He opened the door and looked through. An amazing spectacle met his eyes. The composing-room was in wild disarray. Sacks and furniture and packages had been pulled away from the walls, and there was litter everywhere. He could see Valerie on her hands and knees with her back turned to him waving a dangerous rod of iron, part of the make-up frame, to be exact.

"Here you!" roared Jimmy, who did not at the moment recognize him, and who was beside himself with excitement. "Shut the door!"

Dane shut it instantly, sliding through it like a shadow. Then he saw the rat dart squealing in his direction. "Here. This way," he called, momentarily caught himself by the fight, as he stamped to turn it back.

At the sound of his voice Valerie swung round and leapt to her feet, and for a moment she stood almost transfixed at the sight of him, while Jimmy made a lunge downwards at the hunted beast. Dane stood against the door, almost enveloped in a gray ulster, a tweed cap in one hand. He smiled engagingly at Valerie across the body of Jimmy, who was sprawling on the floor after losing his balance in a resultless plunge.

As for her, she stood like Diana flushed with the lust of the chase, her eyes brilliant, her hair tumbling down. The

plain dress of warm blue woollen stuff she wore set off the life and colour in her head. It struck Dane with the force of a revelation that she was wonderful, and that, more wonderful still, she cared for him.

Trying to cover her first confusion, she ran to him, holding out her hand. She remembered that Jimmy's sharp eyes would be upon them.

"It's a rat. Do wait till we get it," she said excitedly.

He made a face. "You're going to kill it?"

They both spoke as if they had seen each other the day before.

"Oh, yes, a rat, yes."

Seeing it run across the room she darted from him. Just for a minute he was annoyed that after his absence he should be ignored for a rat. Then watching her he was amused. He heard Jimmy yell as the beast turned on her. It sprang onto her shoulders and ran down her back. But she made no sound. She turned with an extraordinarily swift spin and, catching it wavering, despatched it with a deadly blow.

Jimmy leapt into the air with a shout, and then gazed at Valerie with adoration. A girl who was not afraid of a rat—he nearly burst as he thought of it. But she was looking at the dead beast and at the trickle of blood that came from its crushed head. And she knew that Dane was looking down at her.

She got slowly to her feet, and ignoring Dane for the moment, looked round the room as Jimmy picked up the body of the rat.

"I'll clean it up, Miss Carr," said the boy, divining her thoughts.

"Well, I guess it will have to be done, Jimmy," she smiled, and then she turned and walked to the door where Dane still stood with his eyes on her.

A fresh flush burned her face as her eyes met his and fell before them.

"I know I'm ridiculous," she began, a little nervously, "but you know, I just needed that. We've had two wild days, and I had to have something."

He opened the door, and she went through holding up her hair. She dropped into her chair and swung it round, and without any apology let down the dishevelled gold about her head, and then firmly wound and pinned the coils up again, talking as she did so.

"How are you?" she began.

"Very well, I think, thank you." He leaned against the high counter opposite her.

She thought he looked better than she had ever seen him. At least he had not spent his winter in dissipation, as she had feared he might have done.

"It was nice of you to write to me, but it was very rude of you to go off like that without letting me know." As she was not looking at him she did not see the flash that went across his eyes as she said that.

"I'm sorry I was rude," he said repentantly

"You're not a bit sorry," she retorted pertly. "Did you get my letter?"

"I did, thank you."

She had finished pinning her hair. She felt hot and confused. He had evidently come in to say something, and was waiting for Jimmy to get out.

"Won't you take off your coat?"

It seemed to her that he emerged out of it like a radiant creature out of a utilitarian chrysalis. She felt the beauty of his head again as if she were seeing it for the first time.

He was more warmly dressed than she had ever seen him in a square-cut suit of dark blue cloth, with a vest over the white silk shirt, and a very calm gray-blue tie. His

shoes were heavier than usual. She caught a whiff of some delicate scent, as if his clothes were kept with it.

He perched up on the high stool and looked down on her.

"May I smoke?"

"Of course." Then for the first time since he had come in she thought of Bob. "Have you heard about Mr. Lorrimer?" Her voice and mood changed as she asked it.

"Yes. How is he to-day?" His face sobered too.

"Oh, very ill, I'm afraid. Heavens! I was forgetting all about him. Doc Steele is there with him now. He may not live through the night." She was ashamed to think how completely she had forgotten her old friend Bob in the last half hour, and determined now to be more loyal in her mind.

Dane felt the change in her at once and divined the reason for it, and he told himself this was no time to put any emotional pressure upon her, and that he must discipline himself till this tension was over.

"I did not realize he was as ill as that, Miss Carr. I'm very sorry. Benton dropped in and told me on his way home that he had been taken to the hospital."

"Oh, did he?" And the possibility dawned on her mind.

"Yes," he went on, without looking at her. "He asked me if I would do the leaders and political stuff for the *News* till Lorrimer was better."

She said nothing for a minute, but he felt her sudden quickening to life. "What did you say?"

"I said I would." Again he did not look at her. He did not need to.

"You did! You would work for this little paper?"

"Why not? It has just as much power as any other paper for getting a man in."



She was about to speak when Jimmy came through the door. Shooting an unfriendly glance at Dane he walked up to Valerie with a comical air of possession and sat down in the chair beside her. She looked at him. "Oh, the proofs, Jimmy? Well, we were nearly through them. We will finish them in the morning. You go now."

Jimmy understood perfectly that he was being dismissed, and he was resentful against the man who had come in. He knew who he was, and he had overheard Bob say he did not want him to have anything to do with the office. It disturbed him that Valerie should let him stay there, especially with Bob ill in the hospital. She saw he was put out.

"Thanks for what you've done, Jimmy. Mr. Benton has sent Mr. Barrington in to see about helping us out, so I won't read any more proofs to-night. Go on home."

That made the boy feel a little better. He took up his cap and went out saying good-night to her. Then she saw him peeping through the window. She waved him away and they both heard his steps going off.

Dane's eyes were fixed steadily on her again, and they compelled her to look up at him. "Hero worship?" he smiled, nodding his head in the direction of the departing Jimmy.

"As you see, and a bad case. I have to be careful of him. They are so confused and so sensitive at that age ——" She stopped for he had slipped off the stool and was standing in front of her, and something about him lifted her to her feet.

"We never get over it, Valerie dear," he said, very softly.

He felt her tremble and then make a desperate effort to stand still, and the shadow of the dying Bob fell between them.

"I'm sorry. I forgot. I looked at you and forgot. I will be good. But tell me one thing. You won't expect me to be good for very long, will you?"

She looked at him and her eyes answered, and forgetting Bob and the window and the peep-hole their arms swept about each other. But because he was far more sensitive than she, and possibly because he had drunk deep from cups she had but touched the edges of, he drew away from her lips after a few fierce possessive kisses, seeing that if he went on he would submerge her more deeply than he had any intention of doing that night. For him the office was no fit setting for abandonment to her.

They stood for a moment shaken by that unleashing of the forces they had been trying to hold back, and something in the very violence of their relaxation startled them into self-discipline. Valerie dropped down into her chair breathing hard and trying to remember Bob, the work, the next morning.

Dane stood still for a minute amazed that he had let the situation run away from him in this manner. He had not come to the office with the remotest intention of kissing her. And here they were, for he had seen in her eyes the enchantment that he could never resist.

He sat down in the chair beside her and took her hands. She misunderstood his intention.

"Oh, please, we can't really. You don't know what this work is. And I must do it. I have no time to play till it is over." She spoke as if she were afraid of him, but she was just as afraid of herself.

He dropped her hands, feeling the intensity that was burning her.

"Please don't be afraid of me," he pleaded softly. "I'm sorry I let go like that. I won't do it again till you wish it. I promise."

He sat very still wondering how the devil they were to go on without explosions now that they had put the spark to the powder. He had a fierce craving to carry her out to the launch and take her home with him.

Presently her eyes fell on the neglected proofs. They stimulated her to come back to earth and the compelling present.

"You must go, please. I have an hour's work at least, and I cannot wait till the morning. I should have let Jimmy stay."

"Oh Jimmy for the rest of the evening. Yes, come on, dear. I'll read them with you. No, you must not look at me like that. I can't stand it. What the devil do you think a man is? If I'm to stay good you've got to be an angel too."

And then Valerie laughed.

And never in the history of spring show catalogues were such ranges of pictures for sheep and cattle, and dairy produce and vegetables, and home-made cakes and jams and preserves treated with such alternate absorption and indifference as they were in the office of the *News* that night. And it must be confessed that the resolutions with which they began the proof-reading suffered considerably from such a disquietude in the following hour. But with each pause, with each loss with each wondering gaze eye to eye the two sat and laughed more at themselves as time went on. Without trusting it into words they took each other to the test of knowing they would come to some agreement in the morning.

It was nearly seven when they finished the proofs. Valerie went to her watch, and thought again of Bob, and wondered with a little catch in her breath if he were not gone to bed. And she had a sudden revulsion of thought against the most exigencies of the last hour.

"What is it?" asked Dane.

But she did not wish to put any shades on his face, or ring any pain back to his eyes.

"I must get home, dear. I have to be here at eight."

"Eight!"

"Oh yes, eight, every morning now. You see?" She shook her head decidedly at him.

"I see." He helped her on with her coat, and then before she put on her hat he drew her to him and looked into her face. She could not keep her eyes open against that frightening clutch. What did this man expect of her, want of her, when he looked at her like that? Then he felt her lips being very delicately pressed.

"You don't know when I first kissed you," he said softly.

She opened her eyes widely upon him. "I certainly do. That morning when you came into my room?"

"Oh, no. Before that." He smiled at the expression on her face.

"I kissed you the night before as you lay unconscious in the office yard."

"Why, you preposterous perfidious villain," she said delightedly.

"I couldn't help it."

She tried to frown at him, but she could not.

After they had kissed each other again she put out the light and they went to the door. Hearing no one about she walked to the river's edge and stood there while he went off and disappeared in the shadows.

He sat very still wondering how the 'devil they were to go on without explosions now that they had put the spark to the powder. He had a fierce craving to carry her out to the launch and take her home with him.

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"I'm Jimmy for the rest of the evening. Yes, come on, dear. I'll read them with you. No, you must not look at me like that. I can't stand it. What the devil do you think a man is? If I'm to stay good you've got to be an angel too."

And then Valerie laughed.

And never in the history of spring show catalogues were dull pages of entries for sheep and cattle, and dairy produce and vegetables, and home-made cakes and jams and fancy-work treated with such alternate absorption and indifference as they were in the office of the *News* that night. And it must be confessed that the resolutions with which they began the proof-reading suffered considerably from lack of nourishment in the following hour. But with each pause, with each kiss, with each wondering gaze eye to eye they grew gayer, and laughed more at themselves and each other. Without putting it into words they took this evening as they felt it knowing they would come to sober ways upon the morrow.

It was nearly eleven when they finished the proofs. Valerie looked at her watch, and thought again of Bob, and wondered with a little catch at her breath if he were still upon the earth. And she had a sudden revulsion of feeling against the mad happiness of the last hour.

"What is it?" asked Dane.

But she did not wish to put any shades on his face, or bring any pain back to his eyes.

"I must get home, dear. I have to be here at eight."

"Eight!"

"Oh yes, eight, every morning now. You see?" She shook her head decidedly at him.

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## CHAPTER XI

### I

"SHE looks fine to-day," said Jimmy proudly, as he spread on the desk in front of Valerie the first copy of the inside sheet of the *News* to come off the machine. He always made the most of this little ceremony and it never became any less important to him. It was now his job, after Ryder had hammered the last web into the make-up frame, to start the mysterious business that sucked in the sheets of paper, already printed on one side, and turned them over on the other ready to be folded. He made a fine art of grabbing the first one over, doubling it for rapid inspection, rushing with it into the office and spreading it out with a flourish. Then he stood by as if the whole world were waiting, while Valerie hunted for the kind of mistake that might halt the machine. That mistake was seldom found, but she always looked for it and Jimmy always stood as if it were an ominous probability. And with them this afternoon, fully conscious of all there was in the little drama, stood Dane, looking over her shoulder.

"By Jove, Ryder got that in," he said admiringly, pointing to a paragraph at the bottom of a column.

"He gets everything in," she answered.

At that moment there came an untoward sound from the composing-room, then a few creaks, and then a sad silence.

Jimmy's face set in righteous indignation. "Well, if that isn't the dizzy limit?" he demanded of the air. "I went over that confistedicated thing this morning and there

was nothing wrong with her. That's a machine for you!" And he dashed into the composing-room.

Valerie could have laughed if it hadn't been so serious. The boy's comical explosions at the old press, which he treated as if it were a live thing, amused everybody in the office. He reappeared almost immediately in the doorway with a face full of woe.

"It's the engine," he announced tragically. "She's a goner all right. It's all hands to the crank."

"Good Lord!" smiled Dane, "what does he mean?"

"Oh, darn it! The oil engine. It goes off occasionally. The press will have to be kept on by hand. We can't catch the train and everything will be late."

They hurried into the composing-room. It had happened on the worst day that week. Both Ryder and Johnson were working feverishly on a political circular that Dane wanted out as soon as possible. The two men put down their cases of type with a resigned air. Dane looked at Valerie.

"I understand oil engines," he said. "I'll have a go at it if you like."

"Oh, will you? Thanks." She shot him as intent a look as she dared. Ryder and Johnson turned to their benches. Miss Hands and the girls at the cases all stared unblushingly at Dane as he walked to the engine at the back of the room, for this was the first time he had appeared there in the broad light of day. Jimmy, who had thought his white hands meant helplessness, gave him one glance of grudging admiration before going for his runners to help to turn the crank.

Dane pulled off his coat, spread a sheet of brown paper on the floor, and oblivious of the flutter he had brought to the chaste breast of Miss Hands, began to investigate the refractory machine.



Valerie returned into the front office, dropped into her chair, and leaned back for a moment's respite before attacking a pile of stuff on her desk. She was idly wishing that life could go on forever as it had the last two weeks when she heard familiar voices at the door. She swung round in her chair to see her father and Bishop Lorrimer smiling across the counter.

"Why, dad!" She bounded to her feet. "You might have let me know you were coming."

"How are you, Dick, old girl? I decided only late last night that I'd come along with the Bishop and have a look at you."

Davenport Carr was a tall and handsome man with an imposing arrogant head and dissipated face set on a self-indulgent neck. He looked what Valerie had long called him, a tired hedonist. He had the manner of a man used to seeing the multitude tumble over itself to get out of his way. But he was a humane and good-humoured despot for all that. He had rarely found it necessary to show such fangs as he possessed. After all most people were just as ready to serve him as he was ready that they should. He was perfectly dressed in travelling tweeds, and rather dwarfed the importance of the smaller man in black beside him. Bishop Lorrimer was of the ruddy-faced cheerful kind of clerical, who has an inextinguishable faith in the magic of bishop's blood and the sacraments, and an equally inextinguishable faith in the rights of birth and privilege.

Davenport Carr's amused blue eyes roamed round the office. "I suppose you're damned proud of this, Dick?"

"You bet I am. Want to see it all?" For the moment she forgot Dane was on his knees beside the oil engine.

"Rather, if we've time." He looked at the Bishop.

"We've ordered a buggy to pick us up here in a few minutes to take us on to the hospital."

"Nothing here yet," she said, looking out over the top of the whiting on the window. "You've come at a distressing moment," she went on lightly. "The oil engine has broken down." She thought of Dane, and hoped he would not be cross at having to meet her father in his shirt sleeves. She led the way into the composing-room where everybody was going at top speed, and the runners, two at a time, working the printing press crank. There was no sign of Dane. He was down on his knees on the far side of the oil engine.

Valerie led her visitors up to Ryder and Johnson and introduced them. Davenport Carr had caught something of the spirit of that humming workroom. He had heard from Roger too of the Townshend job. And then he had more money than anyone else in this business.

"You're doing tip-top work here, I believe," he said with genuine appreciation. "Does she allow you any time to smoke?" And with a quizzical look at his daughter he handed his cigar case to the men.

"Thanks, sir. Yes, she does," said Ryder warmly, for it was Valerie who had insisted on a ten-minutes' spell in the morning and in the afternoon.

The visitors turned to the printing press, slowly and laboriously grinding out the papers. Just then Davenport Carr caught sight of the figure, that, unaware of their presence, had crawled round the oil engine at the other end of the room.

"What the deuce," he began, and looked at Valerie who shot a mischievous glance back at him. He hesitated for a moment and then walked off. She followed with the Bishop.

Dane looked up as he felt the big form approaching,

and Valerie was delighted to see that he was not in the least upset.

"Well, upon my soul, Barrington, what are you doing there?"

Dane's hands were black and there was a streak of grease where he had flipped a fly off his nose. But he was simple and self-possessed as he looked up at Valerie's father, and not disturbed by the question he thought he saw in his eyes.

"I'm the engineman at present," he said. Then he scrambled to his feet and bowed gravely without speaking as Valerie introduced him to the Bishop, who had never met him.

"I've got at the trouble, I think, Miss Carr. I'll have her going in less than ten minutes."

Valerie had not written of any change in the office, and it happened that her father had not heard of any, but Dane wondered at once if he had come up because he had, and saw by his next words he had not.

"How do you come to be here, anyway?" Davenport Carr asked it very lightly, as if it did not matter in the least.

"I'm writing the leaders till Lorrimer comes back."

"Oh, are you? Will you dine with us at Mac's? I'm going to the hospital first with the Bishop, but I will be back by seven."

"Thanks, I will."

Jimmy came up to Valerie and told her that a buggy had stopped in the front. Nodding pleasantly to the staff Davenport Carr led the way to the office.

## II

Dane was waiting down-stairs in the hotel when Michael

told him Valerie's father was back. He had had but a few minutes to reflect upon the fact that kissing her had made an enormous difference to his attitude towards her father. He was now prepared to resent any probing, covert or open, as to his acquaintance with her. But Davenport Carr was far too clever to show his hand to a man he suspected of being cleverer than himself. And besides all he saw so far was a situation and its possibilities.

Dane led the way to a private room and ordered a preliminary drink. They sat down opposite each other.

"You're looking deucedly well, Barrington."

"I've been living a good deal in the open air this last six months."

"Very sensible. What chance do you think Benton has?"

"The best any man has ever had against Mobray."

"Isn't there a prohibition man out?"

"Yes, but he won't be in at the finish."

"Ah, can be persuaded to stand down, eh?"

"I think so."

Carr smiled across the table at the non-committal white face and into the eyes that met his with easy frankness.

"Ah! how few of us could not be persuaded to stand down, eh, Barrington?"

"Few indeed, I'm afraid. And if I were Benton it isn't Dodge that would worry me, it is Townshend."

"Ah. Big labour vote there?"

"The result lies there, if it ever lies in any one place in an election. But I'm going to warm up Townshend, very carefully, you know. I'll have some leaders on the pioneer work done for the North by these big employers who came in and battled against desperate odds. He had quite a pull, I believe, and it won't hurt to point it out. It will please him, and it may help to make him neutral,

open his camps to both sides, and let his men go uninfluenced."

"That's the idea, Barrington. The silken touch. That will look magnanimous, too."

"It will have to be very carefully done. These chaps know well enough what you're after these days when you do any buttering."

"They may do. But buttering wins elections just the same. By the way, I didn't know you were interested in politics." Davenport Carr said it very carelessly.

"That shows a lamentable lack of knowledge of some of my best work, Carr," smiled Dane. "However, as it was in Australia, you are pardoned for not being familiar with it. But I've always taken considerable interest in the New Zealand legislation. You forget that I've been something of an idealist for the human race."

The older man had to smile at the expression on the younger one's face. And then the personal charm that emanated from Dane, affecting men as well as women, began to work. And Carr remembered that he was one of the best bridge players he had ever met.

"What about a game to-night?" he asked.

Dane hesitated. "Well, yes, I'd like it. But it would have to be late, Carr. Would you like to have Mac and Doc Steele as well?"

"Yes, all right."

Just then the sounds of the piano drifted down to them. Davenport Carr thought he detected a swiftly repressed attention to it on the part of the other man. He himself pretended not to know who it was who was playing. But Dane gave no sign. He lit another cigarette and asked Carr how many seats the Opposition hoped to win in Auckland.

"Their hopes are a bit extravagant, I think. I believe that's Valerie at the piano, isn't it?"

"I've heard she plays well. I don't think there is anyone else about who does."

Davenport Carr stood up. "I'll go up. What time do we get dinner, do you know?"

"A little late, I'm afraid. Mac ordered fresh chickens in your honour."

"Oh. Will you come upstairs?"

"No, thanks."

Valerie turned from the piano as her father walked in. "How did you find Bob to-day?" she asked.

"Looks pretty sick, poor chap, beastly thin. But they say he's getting on. You haven't been often, Mrs. Lorri-mer says." His keen eyes rested lightly on his daughter as he said it.

Valerie sprang up from the piano stool. "Good Lord, dad, that woman drives me mad. What does she think I do all day and most of the night? I've been along on the Sundays, used the only spare hour or two I had. That's all I could do. She doesn't know what work means."

"I suppose she doesn't." Davenport Carr settled himself in the most comfortable chair he could find and looked round the dingy sitting-room with amused eyes. "Like all this, Val?"

"Rather awful, isn't it? But I don't look at it. You know, dad, it's wonderful what you can ignore in the world if you know how."

"Do you think you're teaching me something?" he asked amiably.

Her eyes twinkled at him. She enjoyed the perfectly arrogant spectacle he made in his swagger tweeds, but she was distressed to see that the folds in his

neck were fuller and the pockets under his eyes more spongy.

"You haven't asked after the family," he said.

"Has anything of importance happened to any of them?"

"Now, Dick, old girl. It's time you were getting tolerant. They're all right, you know."

"Ah, you're growing tired, dad. That's what is the matter with you. You've no more fight in you."

"Indeed." He looked curiously at her. "By the way, what do you get to fight up here?"

She laughed. "Nothing. Everybody loves me, and I just live for the office."

"Nothing to fight? How boring life must be. Are you seeing much of Barrington?"

She had been waiting for that. "What would you call much?"

"Anything with him. He's too damned fascinating."

Valerie's eyes twinkled again at her father. "And why should he not fascinate me? Why am I to be deprived of fascination?"

"That's all right, old girl. But you be careful. He's outside the pale as far as you are concerned."

"Dad, you must know you're a fool to talk to me like that. No person is outside the pale as far as I am concerned until I put him there myself. And I'm surprised at you suggesting this thing to me by talking against it. Between you and Bob you'd have me living with Dane Barrington in a month if I let you talk to me."

This frankness astonished her father and threw him off the scent.

"Of course I admire his looks," she went on easily, "and I'm well aware of his fascination. But looks and fascination don't overwhelm me. I want something that

you used to care about once, or you said you did—character. And I would never care about any man who hadn't it."

And Davenport Carr, clever as he was, overlooked the fact that they might not be thinking the same ingredients into that term.

He was reassured and went down to dinner feeling that Dane Barrington, with his fine social sense, must understand well enough the social gulf that existed between a man who could not be asked out to dinner and a girl bred in the select precincts of the Remuera set.

Something about that dinner party amused Valerie enormously and roused Dane. The spectacle of Mac and Davenport Carr side by side was in itself subject for comedy. Each of them was an autocrat in his own fashion, and each of them appreciated the eminence of the other in his own profession, recognized his authority, and would obey it in his given domain. Mac was as sublimely easy as his turned-up shirt sleeves and split vest indicated. The gentleman never lived who could overawe him, and Davenport Carr, despising sycophancy while ever ready to use it, thoroughly enjoyed the independence of spirit that glared at him out of those hard blue eyes. And he was amusedly aware of Mac's great hairy arms, of his fat, red hands cleverly carving the chicken, of his enormous head and shoulders, of his curious poise, and of the contrast he made to Dane on the other side of him.

Within a minute or two after they sat down Dane took charge of the conversation by a kind of divine right universally acknowledged. The sight of steaming chickens and bottles of champagne was all that was necessary to start him, and after one or two drinks he was off.

Valerie watched the responsiveness grow between him and her father, the one stimulating the other. And as she



watched she was struck more than ever with the fundamental difference in their quality of mind and spirit. It was not till the meal was nearly over that she saw they were drinking too much. They seemed to drink unconsciously, glass after glass. Dane in particular, talking with increasing brilliance, almost forgot to eat.

She became uncomfortably aware of the time, felt she must get back to the office, but knew her father would be angry at a dinner party disrupted. However, at a quarter to nine, she fidgeted and stood up.

"Awfully sorry, dad, but I must get back to work," she said.

"What?" he exclaimed irritably. "You too?" He looked at Dane who had got at once to his feet.

"Yes, I must, Carr. I promised Johnson I'd be there to plan an inset."

"When will you get back?"

Dane hesitated. Pleasantly relaxed though he was, he would have been glad to end the evening there. And he was sorry that Valerie should hear of anything further. But this was the kind of thing he did not know how to get out of.

"Oh, about eleven," he said.

Knowing her father, Valerie guessed how the night would end, but she crushed back a stab of pain, telling herself she must not anticipate trouble. Dane lit his pipe when they got out of the hotel, and they went in silence by the river past the station wharf. It was the first time they had gone through the town together for they had been very careful. As it was dark and they could hear no one Dane drew her hand under his arm after they had passed the wharf. She had drunk sufficient champagne herself to make her feel that it was absurd to be serious about anything.

The office was lit up and Johnson was there when they went in. He and Dane worked till about half-past ten, and then the jobbing man went out. A few minutes later Dane came into the front office. Concentration on the work had cleared his head. He leaned down over Valerie, put his arms about her and raised her face and kissed it. She jumped up, and threw her arms about him. This was the only time when they allowed themselves any lapse of their sternly disciplined emotions.

He held her off and looked at her.

"Valerie, your father is going to be dead against us," he said quietly. "Now, dear, don't go off. I know as well as you he has no real right to interfere. But he thinks he has the right of a code, you know. And there's a good deal to be said for it, and it worries me a little."

"Dane, I insist that you forget my father and my set and my position, and remember me, just me as I stand here."

"That's what I'm doing now, dear."

"I wonder. But it is what I am doing with you."

"I wonder," he repeated, putting his head on one side and peering at her in the beguiling way he had.

"Go away," she commanded. "Go away at once. I have half an hour's work yet. Tell dad I've gone to bed. He will forget all about me anyway." Her tone shaded off in regretfulness.

His eyes, considerably softened, regarded her thoughtfully, but he was too pleasantly relaxed to worry about anything. Kissing her once more very lightly he went out.

### III

After he had gone Valerie ruthlessly set herself to the remaining work, and at eleven o'clock she was finished.

She locked up the office and went out. But she did not turn to the hotel. She knew she would not get to sleep for some time. She walked a little way beyond the station and sat down in a clump of rushes near the river bank.

The two weeks that she and Dane had worked together on the *News* had been illuminating for both of them. She had seen at once after their first evening of kissing each other that neither of them could go on like that and do the work. She had been unable to sleep without a big dose of aspirin, and she had felt utterly demoralized the next day. In sheer self-defence she put it to Dane the first chance she had, and told him that their emotions must wait. She had expected opposition, but she was surprised to discover that he kept the contract much more faithfully than she did.

Dane had told Roger that in addition to the leaders and articles he would help Valerie in the office on publishing days, and that he would get out circulars and other literary ammunition. He astonished Roger and the committee with ideas. He began to write leaders that had a fire and appeal no other journalist in the country could equal. For he knew how to play upon the emotions of men, and he knew thoroughly the types with whom he had to deal. He had not talked and drunk and sung with these men for nothing.

And Valerie, thinking about him as she sat by the river, told herself that he had shown qualities in those two weeks that revealed him as a man absurdly misunderstood, and misunderstood, of course, because he himself had not the desire or the energy to care about it. She knew that more than anyone she had ever met he saw and appreciated exactly what she accomplished, mentally and spiritually and physically, in that daily rush; that every time she kept her temper against odds, that every time she set her-

self against giving way to nervous pressure, that every time she managed a difficult interview, or flashed a ready response to some unexpected incident, he knew and estimated it as accomplishment. And nothing in her life had so warmed her, had so stimulated and fired her as that understanding.

And because it so warmed her, because her love for him was daily changing and enlarging its horizons, she could not bear to think of the cloud that she knew descended at times upon that spirit. She had gone through many a tragic hour since the day she had first seen her father the worse for drink. But she had become philosophical about him. She knew well enough that during the process he had died to her as the father of her childhood, and had come to light in a new form as the product of perverted idealisms. And there had come a time when she could even look upon him drunk without emotion. But she knew she would never get to that stage with Dane. Then she told herself she was being absurdly serious about it. That after all, occasional excess need not be allowed to overshadow their love for each other. That she simply must not allow it to. She had known all along of his habits. And she was committed to him now in spite of them.

Unexpectedly a peace descended upon her, as something in the spring night wrought its magic within her. She had worried herself into fevers many times over the reason for what she saw about her. She had put her despairing Whys to the impotent stars, but she had struggled through to one dominant perception, the existence of beauty in manifold forms, and the more she sought it, the more she let herself go out to it, the more she found it everywhere. And she knew that it was for that that Dane lived too.

Comforted she got up and walked back to the hotel. It was nearly midnight, but the place was lit on two of the side rooms. She did not try to listen to see in which of them Dane might be. She went straight to her room and wearied out soon fell asleep.

She was at the office at eight in the morning. She did not know whether her father had caught the boat which had left unusually early. She wondered if Dane would appear that day with the next day's leader as he usually did, so that it could be set ahead of the rush copy. But she had a premonition that he would not, and arranged her space accordingly. She was right. He did not come in till ten the next morning. She was glad that Bolton was there, having just come in with the news that Dodge was not going to stand, and that he was in George Rhodes' office that moment framing an announcement which he was shortly to bring along.

She greeted Dane eagerly with this news, ignoring his sensitive and irritable manner. He was enormously relieved. He had dreaded meeting her. But he saw no judgment in her eyes. The moment passed and the rush of the day was on. The incident of Davenport Carr's visit was ancient history to Valerie by night. But it had left one of those little dents in her mind which, being one of accumulative experience, had more significance than was apparent to the naked eye when it seemed to die.

So many things seem to die and do not.

## CHAPTER XII

### I

ONE Friday night in the third week in September Valerie and Dane worked alone. The front door was open, and there stole in to refresh the stuffy office the soft fragrance of an irresistible night. All day long Valerie had shot envious glances over the top of the whiting on the window across the river at the spreading swamp veiled with the enchantments of spring. And at intervals Dane too had looked out at the river and the swamp, and had thought of friendly little creeks he knew, and plaintive lagoons he knew, and pleasant backwaters he knew, and willow-girdled pools he knew where he craved to be with Valerie.

She leaned back in her chair after she had finished editing a letter from a farmer, and thought of the wonderful week they had had. Dane had brilliantly frustrated two moves on the part of the enemy, had forestalled them in another, and had given George Rhodes some valuable hints to follow up. It was now generally known who it was who was conducting the lively campaign waged by this youngster among journals, and every post brought them back comments on it. Dane's articles on the North were often copied in full, the party heads were quoting some of his most pungent criticisms of the Ward government, and altogether the eyes of their little world were upon them. This in itself was pleasantly thrilling. But it was nothing to the wonder that was going on inside themselves, gathering intensity from the curbs they put upon it.

Valerie looked at Dane's head bent forward while his pen raced to finish Monday's leader. Her fingers ached to play with that seductive hair. The more or less chaste good-night kiss they allowed themselves was fast becoming a very miserable dole to hand out to each other from the splendours of love they felt within them. But Dane had kept more steadily in mind even than she had the hard cold fact that she had to be at the office at eight every morning. And perhaps in the final reckoning of accounts the little thoughtfulnesses will be weighed against the big sins and found to have astonishing tonnage.

But he had come to feel that they were missing their legitimate share of the spring, and, determined that he would get her away from the office for a while at the end of the week, he had given her more help, so that this night they were so well ahead that there was nothing but ordinary routine for the Saturday morning. Then, too, her other anxiety, Bob, was now, in spite of one bad relapse, safely on the road to recovery and would, in another week's time, be well enough to go home for a final rest before coming back to the drive of the last three weeks.

As he read over his leader Dane felt her insistent scrutiny of him and swung round on his chair. After looking at her he caught her hands.

"Look here, I can't be noble much longer, can you?"

"No I can't," she chuckled delightedly.

He looked at his watch. "It's only ten. Come out on the river for a while."

"Oh, glorious, I've been wanting that for days."

"You haven't wanted it any more than I have," he said softly.

He took the copy into the composing-room, turned out the lights, and hatless they stood in front of the outer door listening. Then seeing there was no one about she

locked up and they crossed the road to the river bank where he now kept his launch when he was working in the office.

It seemed strange to her that it was the first time she had had a chance to get out on the river, with him. She noticed by the light of the lantern he lit for the bow that the interior of the boat was beautifully clean, and wondered if he took care of it himself. It was built like a grayhound and had a forward cabin large enough for two people to sleep in. There were cushions and an old rug on the floor by the stern seat. She sat down there with him and put an arm round his shoulder and sat still.

To her as to him a boat was some kind of sanctuary, a retreat from the world and all its stupidities, frets and fevers, and something about it calmed the excitement that had begun to pound her as they came out of the office. They sat silent while he drove very fast, looking keenly ahead for stray logs or the ends of sunken snags, for the spring rains were liable to bring down sinister things. But it was a clear night and shadows were visible for some distance in the middle of the stream. Presently he steered to the further bank and went more slowly. They made a little breeze which was pleasantly cool against their cheeks. They passed solemn clumps of trees standing black against the stars. They passed valleys belted with strands of cobwebby film. They passed lonely little wharves, merely a few planks negligently attached to wobbly piles, where hopeful settlers from remote gullies came to bring wool and potatoes and grain, and to get in return seeds and wire and kegs of nails. They passed the sheds and camps of timbermen, and the mangrove-sheltered mouths of creeks beckoning for exploration.

Dane told her tales of many of these things for he knew and loved them all. He kept on till the lights about



Te Koperu dimly lit the river's edge and then he turned back and ran till he came to the tree hung arc by his own house. There in the black still water against the frowning range of bush he slowed down, and finally stopped against the rocks at a place where a clump of totara above hid the stars.

He drew up the rug and wrapped it about them and then he drew Valerie into his arms. He felt her grow hot and tense at once, but he had not set out with the intention of making love to her. He was compounded of strange vagaries and powerful moods, and few women had ever been able to impose sentimentality upon him when he did not want it. He liked to vision experience as pictures, and he tried to make life follow the pictures he painted with his imagination. He was not always able to do so, he was fast coming to a stage with Valerie when he would not be able to do so, but this night his mood was dominant. He held her without attempting to kiss her.

Then he began to recite:

Here, in this little bay,  
Full of tumultuous life and great repose,  
Where, twice a day,  
The purposeless, glad ocean comes and goes,  
Under high cliffs, and far from the huge town,  
I sit me down.  
For want of me the world's course will not fail;  
When all its work is done the lie shall rot;  
The truth is great, and shall prevail,  
When none cares whether it prevail or not.

All the fever died out of Valerie. She was afraid to move lest she should break the spell those lines had put upon her. She knew that in saying them he had told her something significant about himself. And contrary to

her habit of mind with men her fierce individualism was being insidiously undermined. She was following him.

His mood changing he sang the refrain of a popular French song:

Je sais que vous êtes jolie,  
Que vos grands yeux pleins de douceur  
Ont charmé tout mon coeur,  
Et que c'est pour la vie.  
Je sais que c'est une folle,  
Que loin de vous je devrais  
M'en aller à jamais.  
Je sais, je sais que vous êtes jolie.

She loved the gay little air which she had never heard, but because she had sadly neglected the French she had learned from her governess she could not make out all the sense of it.

"What's that about folly and running away?" she demanded, raising her face.

But he calmly put a hand over her mouth and pushed her head down, and then to puzzle her sang the song through, knowing that it would tease her.

When he had finished she tried to wriggle up. But his arms tightened about her.

"Tell me what it said," she demanded again.

He leaned down and began to move his lips about in her hair.

"I will not be suppressed," she said, trying to resist him.

"All right, Miss Freedom," he said softly, suddenly releasing his hold upon her, so that she slipped back and hit her head against the handle of the rudder.

The solicitude Dane showed over that mishap was out of all proportion to its size, but her appetite for solicitude

was fast becoming abnormally increased, and she did not find it over-much. She was only too content to be caught up in his arms and kissed as he began to kiss her then. He became dynamically and startlingly alive; his grip about her seemed to burn into her flesh. He had changed too quickly for her to respond at once and when her mood rose to meet his he had begun to curb his own. He grew still, and held her lightly.

She had a queer sensation that she was being disintegrated by this potent personality who was mesmerizing her into following his moods, that she was being used as an instrument for the play of his mind and his emotion. And the queerest thing about it was that she did not mind.

But the evening did not proceed as she had imagined it might. He took out his pipe, and when he struck the match to light it he looked at his watch.

"It's eleven, dear. I must get you home."

Valerie did not want to go home. She almost said so. But she sat up, and a little chilled, more mentally than physically, drew the rug over her knees while he started the engine. When he had the *Diana* out in midstream he put an arm about her and then appeared to forget her. She wondered as they went on how many women had loved him without understanding him in the least. She was beginning to see that certainly no woman of the society type, caught at first by his looks, could follow the meanderings of his moods, or be satisfied for long by the capriciousness of his attention. But she saw him impersonally as well as personally. She was able, even while succumbing to his looks and charm, to stand off from him and see him for the baffling and appealing creature that he was. She was able to see him against his heredity, against his background, his strengths set against his own weaknesses, his accomplishments against his failures.

It was not till they were by the borders of the town that he asked some of those simple questions that change lives. He was going slowly along the bank looking for a good place to land her.

"What have you to do to-morrow afternoon, dear?"

"Nothing, unless something very unexpected turns up in the morning."

"Good. Will you come out with me again?"

"Of course I will."

"And would you come to my house and play to me and have dinner with me?"

"Oh, I'd love to."

## II

The minute they set eyes on each other the next afternoon they knew that each had prepared for a real party.

Valerie wore a charming dress that she had recently had made and sent up to her from Auckland by a dress-maker who knew her tastes. It was of a heavy blue silk crêpe, a shade between navy and indigo that deepened the colour of her eyes, and it was fetchingly decorated with small dull red buttons. It was of the simplest lines imaginable and under it her limbs moved freely. She wore a little straw hat in the same tones of blue and red. It was by no means a boating costume, but caught on the dilemma of the river and dinner she had compromised as best she could.

Dane gave her a long intent look as she stepped forward to the bow of the *Diana* hidden in the rushes.

And she looked at him in much the same manner. He was wearing white flannels with a navy double-breasted coat and a yachting cap, and more glamorous than any captain who ever before sailed a ship he held out his hand

to her. Something had happened to them both since they had parted soberly the night before.

"What a charming dress, dear. It just occurs to me that I have never seen you out of office or riding clothes."

"I know," she said regretfully. "And you, how stunning you look in those things."

They stood in the bow of the boat staring at each other. There were questions and shy evasions in their eyes. Then because this was no place for romance, with the public road only a few chains away and riders likely to be numerous on Saturday afternoon, he moved away and settled a possum rug for her to sit upon at the stern. Then with an oar he pushed the launch off and soon he was making for the other side of the river to avoid boats that might be coming down to Dargaville.

The world was flooded with soft sunshine, and every rush and every mangrove bush and every tree along the bank proclaimed the handiwork of spring.

After half an hour Dane turned in at the narrow mouth of a deep creek and in a minute the river was out of sight behind mangroves. They were soon in a gully with hills shooting up on either side, a gully that was pure beauty from the tree-ferns at the water's edge to the sun-tinted bush on the skyline. He went more slowly as the stream narrowed, dodging stumps and logs and roots until they came round a bend into an oval pool into which the *Diana* drifted and stopped.

Valerie drew herself up and looked into that mirror of shaded jade. The sound of a waterfall near explained why it was clear and jewelled with the greens of the hills. She looked round her and caught her breath. Holding the last of the afternoon sun that was finding its way down here was a clump of rimu, and she knew why Dane had brought her.

The rimu is the most fragile tree on earth. Some poet among the gods more delicate and mystical than the spirits about him drank a nectar prepared to stimulate imagination and dreamed this tree. It was to be a thing of misty shape, as intangible as gossamer, as variable as a cloud. The gods worked with his idea a long time, and at last they fashioned a magic thing of tasselled fringes, its rich green dusted to luminousness by a silver bloom, a vague shape to sway with every breath of wind, to change with every movement of a bird's wing, so restless and mobile a tree that it would drive an artist to despair to try to catch its form. Nothing but the music of Debussy quivering upon violin strings could adequately suggest its beauty. And the gods had placed it in the fairest setting they could find, in valleys of tropical prodigality among the nikau and the tree-ferns, where its cobwebby loveliness softened the stiff splendours of the puriri and its lacy perfection humbled the arrogance of the kauri, the king of the bush.

This was what Dane liked to think as he looked upon a rimu tree, and he had brought Valerie there because he knew of no fairer gift to give her that day.

After some minutes they turned to look at each other. Tragedy would have come into their lives there and then if either had spoken a word. He saw a quiver on her lips. He drew her down with him on to the rug, and leaning against the seat held her close to him. And so they stayed making no sound to offend the sensitive deities of that enchanted spot. Presently he began to think of her and of the beauty of her hair, for she had taken off her hat, and the sun's rays lit up her head lying in the hollow of his arm. And he looked into her clear eyes so generously set in her flushed face, and he was glad without any thought of past or future, for that hour alone.

He said to himself, like the incurable child that he ~~was~~, that when the sun left her hair he would turn home.

### III

"I seem to have known you so long that I cannot realize that you have not been here before."

They had paused at the end of the path leading from his steps into the garden. Valerie had clutched at his arm with the queer choking feeling that the day was too much for her. She saw the gray house, low and rambling, against its background of garden and forest wall. She saw honeysuckle and ivy softening its corners and crawling over its red roof. She saw an enormous magnolia tree filling the air with its exotic scent, bushes of graceful fuchsias, of old-fashioned roses, of oleander and camellias. She saw tumbledown seats that Dane never sat upon, and a stone bowl on a pedestal overrun with a rich, red ivy geranium. And everywhere as a carpet were violets and narcissi and periwinkle and primroses. It was a gloriously untidy garden. Grass grew upon the paths. Weeds flourished in many spots. There was freedom for all things there.

"I found in dreams a place of wind and flowers  
Full of sweet trees and colour of glad grass."

Then he paused wondering if she knew the quotation. She shot, for the first time that day, a provocative look at him.

"And the lady?"

"And now, I hope, the lady, 'clothed like summer with sweet hours,' " he said, very softly.

She closed her eyes as she felt his arms sweeping about her. And it did not seem in the least absurd that they

should stand there in the full sunlight kissing each other again. Nor did it seem absurd that as they went on they should stop every now and then, forget the thing they had been talking about, or put down the thing they had taken up, and find their lips pressed hard against each other. They made indeed so lingering a pilgrimage about the garden that the dusk came down upon them while they were yet exploring it.

Then he led her round to the verandah. Valerie knew that invisible things were closing in upon her as she sat down. Life, outwardly so undisturbed in that beautiful old garden, was yet beating fiercely in the recesses of her own heart. But she was helpless to move, either to restrain or to hurry up life, helpless against the mood of the man who gaily set her just where he wanted her to be in a low chair, and then went inside to get the right kind of cushion to put at the back of her head.

Then when he had arranged her to his satisfaction he got into his hammock and looked at her.

With a strange sense of unreality Valerie felt someone come up behind her. She found a tea-table placed in front of her, and she forced herself to smile up at Lee, remembering their former meeting. But the Chinese boy, living his life in the present moment, without reference to past incident or future possibility, gave her but the gravest bow, arranged everything in the most convenient spot and was gone.

Faced with the implements of a feminine craft Valerie pulled herself together.

"I wish you could know how wonderful it is to me to have you here pouring out the tea," said Dane.

She looked at him helplessly. "Do you take sugar and cream?"

"Yes, a little of both."



She leaned forward holding out his cup which he was just able to reach. As they drank, the rooms beside them were lit up, the curtains parted, and bands of light streamed over the verandah.

Valerie tried to forget the man who lay in the hammock looking at her. She forced herself to ask questions about the things she had heard he had willed to the Sydney Museum, tried to still the rather sickening pounding of her heart. When they had finished he got out of the hammock and led her into the study where the fire had just been lit. She looked round the room knowing it was just as beautiful as she had expected it to be. It did something to her, exactly what she could not have told. Everything in it began to run together.

"Will you play to me now, dear?" he asked.

"Oh, I—I couldn't play just now."

She felt his eyes burning upon her face. She looked up as he caught her against him.

"Then will you play to me—to-morrow?"

Her answer was given to his lips.

And then the world faded away from Valerie, and a man's imperious face and possessive arms were all there was of substantial stuff left in a great space. And her resolutions and ambitions deserted her as if they had never been, and she stood in her imaginative house of many mansions with but one certainty, that love was all and the world well lost for it, and she consigned all other considerations to the attic to keep company with the spiders and the dust.

## CHAPTER XIII

### I

“WELL, Miss Freedom, where are you now?”

“I don’t know.”

The question had been asked with a quizzical raising of the black eyebrows and had been answered with a comically pathetic frowning of the amber ones.

It was the following afternoon, and they lounged together on a rug that Dane had spread on a flat rock above the river at one end of the garden. They had been dozing with their arms about each other. She had waked up finally at the pressure of kisses on her mouth and the question. She had drawn herself up resting her chin on her knees, and was looking down on the river.

“No thoughts at all on freedom?” teased Dane.

“No thoughts about anything,” she answered, gazing into space across the river.

He lit his pipe and puffed contentedly, turning often to look at her, vividly conscious now of her every movement. Fantails flew inquisitively about them, and a pair of wood pigeons courted each other with a shameless lack of vocal reticence upon the branches of a totara tree. The hum of bees in the garden behind them was a drowsy and insistent monotone. He felt wonderfully relaxed and happy.

Valerie was full of the glory of this lifting of herself off the earth. She had never supposed that the man existed who could bring love to her clothed with the beauty and delicacy of some romantic dream. But wonder of wonders this man beside her had brought it to her that way.

Dane envied her her complete submersion. He was hap-

pier than he had expected to be again, and was not disposed to question his happiness, but he was less overwhelmed by it, much more conscious of the world about him, and when the tea-gong sounded he was glad to hear it, whereas Valerie had forgotten there was a world in which tea was served.

He got to his feet and pulled her up to him.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Tea, dear."

"Oh! Are we really on the earth? I must wake up."

"Don't. You are very charming asleep. You remember I fell from grace the very first time I saw you so."

She flashed a brilliant smile at him. "So you did. It was mean to steal a march on me like that."

They came out upon the path and hand in hand went up the verandah steps.

It did not surprise Lee in the least to find them both in the hammock. Valerie could not see that any signal passed between him and Dane. But the boy stayed to pour for them. With perceptions of his own he had put on the tray valuable little vermilion cups that Dane never used for himself. That was the only sign he gave that he understood this was an occasion. He enquired solemnly of Valerie as to her taste in sugar and cream. He handed them their cups and the biscuit jar. He put the table beside the hammock and transferred smoking apparatus to it. Then he moved off like a leaf going by on the wind.

Dane looked after him with huge appreciation. "Perfect, isn't he?" he said.

"I think they're both wonderful. But then everything about you is. Where did you get them?"

"I found them in China and arranged to have them come out to me. I couldn't live without them now."

"How long have you had them?"

"Oh, years, I forget exactly. I sent them back once for a while to see their people when I came over here with my wife. She wanted to live in hotels, and they were not happy."

"They seem to be such an astonishing combination."

"Yes, aren't they? They beat us Anglo-Saxons hollow at that. You see how they run the house. They do menial labour as if it were a sacrament. They spiritualize it. It never spoils their manners and habits. There is not a trace of vulgarity about them. I never think of them as servants. They are presences to me, and when I want them to be company they are. They never make a noise. I rarely go into the kitchen, but when I do it is never in a mess. They never get irritated. They never seem to be tired. They understand me in some extraordinary way. They know how to take care of me when I am ill. They pay no attention to my irritation, my restlessness, my nerves. They are adaptable. I think they are happy here. I've tutored them in English and in French and in our money system. I've taught them to play chess, and most of the time they can beat me at it. How they find time to have the vegetable garden they do I don't know, but a Chink of any kind can make things grow by looking at them, I think. But the thing that interests me most is their ungetatableness, if I may make so clumsy a word, their subtlety. I never know what these boys are thinking about, and sometimes I would give my soul to know."

"Well, that's the Eastern problem, isn't it?"

"What?"

"That you can't trust them?"

"My dear, you can trust a cultured Chinaman as you can an Englishman."

"But I mean—in a crisis, with women, or in a panic."

"Of course you can. You've got in mind the ignorant and superstitious coolie, but what about the ignorant and superstitious cockney or any other corresponding class? Both have to be kept decent as a last resort at the nose of a pistol. There's no difference there."

"And you think there's no difference between us and them?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. The Chinese are superior to us in subtlety, endurance and some mental capacities. And they never needed to have lawyers till we obtruded our pleasant casualness about debts upon them."

She laughed. "You may be right, dear. But I should be surer of the Anglo-Saxon mind for all that."

"H'm! How much do you think you know about mind? What does one ever know about anybody's mind? Some of us fuss because we don't know what is going on on the other side of the world. Why, the fact is we don't know what is going on in the same room with us. Sit down at Mac's to dinner with twenty men, your Anglo-Saxon mind. You don't know how many of them are heading for black despair, or why, or how many of them have the least idea of what they're after in the world, or what things really matter to any of them, and if you knew them for ten years you might not find out. You don't know what goes on inside any person."

Valerie wriggled to a sitting position in the hammock.

"I've often thought that about you. All kinds of things go on inside you at the back of those eyes of yours, things I shall never know."

"Nothing that need ever frighten you, dear, really." He put a hand on one of hers.

"I don't know. The despairs that people face are often more fearful to others than to themselves."

He gave her a quick penetrating look, and then a whimsical smile crossed his face.

"Valerie Carr, this is a spring day. And I'd like another cup of tea." But he thought of her remark many times in the next week or two.

Valerie carefully manœuvred herself out of the hammock and sat down at the tea-table.

Dane watched her, amused that it should delight him so much to have her raise the cream jug over his cup and watch him till he nodded "enough," amused that he should find it so important to balance the hammock carefully while she got back beside him, and then so entertaining that they should drink sip by sip to each other, their eyes shining across the rims of those elegant red cups.

When Lee had taken the things away Dane insisted on music. For nearly two hours he lay listening to her, thinking it a wonderful thing that life could still make dreams come true, and anticipating the time when she would be there with him to play to him when he wanted her to.

Thinking of it he could even be philosophical about the fact that he had promised to have an early dinner and to run her afterwards in his launch to the Aratapu hospital to see Bob. He knew she would have preferred to stay with him, but he admired her all the more because she had not wavered for an instant about going.

## II

It was the next Wednesday night before Valerie could take an hour to go out on the river with him again. She had had moments of regretting that they had not waited till the election was over. And then she told herself that

the strain of waiting would have been worse than the reaction from letting go.

Dane had run the launch into a lagoon at one end of the big swamp opposite Dargaville and they sat on the floor at the stern with their arms about each other. They had been working together all day sternly repressing all signs of their feeling for each other. And after three long days she was very tired. He was determined to relax and rest her, but his first words after they settled had results strangely remote from his intention.

"I wish the darned thing were over," he grumbled. "How soon afterwards can you get away and marry me?"

He felt her stiffen against him. She withdrew her arm, turned a little and stared at him.

"Why, Dane—you don't have to ask me to do that!"

There was enough of a young moon for them to see the startled questioning on each other's faces.

"Have to!" he repeated. "My dear girl, what do you mean by that remark?"

"Do you mean that you have meant marriage—all along?" She did not know why his look made her flush to the roots of her hair, but it did.

"I say, my child," he said very quietly, "I want to know why you have assumed I meant anything else."

"I—I don't know," she said helplessly.

"Oh, I know. You did take some notice of gossip after all, didn't you?"

She drew a deep breath. She was speechless.

"You haven't thought of marrying me?" he went on, in the same quiet way.

"No."

"I'm very sorry." Something about the crushed way

he said it, and the way he moved just a little from her, snapped her control.

"Oh, now you don't understand," she gasped, and she dropped her head into her hands, and began to sob.

Dane pulled himself together and put an arm about her shoulders. "I'm going to understand before I'm a day older. Stop crying, Valerie, dear. I can't stand it."

It was the irritation in his tone that helped her to control. He particularly loathed seeing a woman cry. And then he was annoyed with himself that after all his experience he should be as much at sea with a woman as he now felt he was with her.

"Dane, will you be frank with me? Because it's all going to be spoiled—awful if you're not."

"As far as I know how to be, my dear, yes."

"Why do you wish to marry me?"

"Why—why—because I care for you in the way I do, because I want you to come and live with me."

"You're not thinking of my father, my family ——"

"What the hell do you mean, Valerie?" he said with a burst of anger that startled himself and her. "Good God! I thought you cared for me. What is the matter with me that I never can understand your sex? And honestly I did think you were above insult."

He sprang to his feet and stumbled along to the bow and stood there looking away from her. He was so hurt that he was blind.

And Valerie saw how badly she had blundered. "Dane, will you please come back to me?" she called, struggling for control.

Because he was above foolish temper he turned almost at once and went slowly back and sat on the seat above her. She got up, and sitting very tensely with her hands gripped about her knees, she looked at him.



"Please, Dane, I put that very badly. I thought that after the way I've talked about marriage you knew I didn't want to marry anybody, but that you were afraid of the trouble dad and the family might make for me if you did not. What I thought was that you were not considering your own real wishes at all, that you were just being—well, conventionally decent about it. But I see that you never took the things I've said about marriage, or a career, or living my own life any more seriously than anybody else has ever done. And the trouble is, that however mad I seem to you and everybody else, I am serious about it."

"You can be as serious as you like about it," he said. "I know well enough you're serious about it. But marrying me will neither kill your career nor stop you living your own life."

She turned her troubled eyes full upon him.

"You don't believe me," he said harshly.

"Please, Dane, oh please," her voice trembled. But as he sat aloof and made no move to soothe her she controlled herself.

"Will you listen to me if I talk?"

"Yes, of course."

It was a cold tone, hard to talk against. What she had said to hurt him like that she did not know. But she forced herself to go on.

"I suppose I'm morbid about freedom. I had to fight so for every bit of mine that I've swung to the other direction. And you see I heard such rubbish talked about ceremonies, all kinds of ceremonies, christenings, confirmations, weddings, everybody confusing the form with the feeling, or rather taking no account of the feeling at all—and you see the feeling was everything to me, and I came to throw all the forms overboard, all of them, I despise

them. And I have made my own ceremonies—I say things to myself, and I try to live by them. On Sunday night, before I went to sleep, I had my ceremony for you ——”

She found herself being swung over into his arms, and her lips stilled by his.

“I’m sorry I was angry, Valerie dear.”

“You weren’t angry. You were hurt, and I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I’m sure you didn’t.”

He sat still for some time, his hold of her tense, but he kept his face away from her, raised as if he were keeping a fixed gaze upon a star that twinkled feebly above the valley horizon. Presently he looked down at her.

“What do you intend to do with me, Valerie?”

“Do with you?”

“That is what I asked.”

She raised herself and he released her without pressure.

“Why, Dane, can’t we go on loving one another?”

“I hope so. I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Then, Dane, you are thinking of something—of something besides just us.”

“We are not on a desert island, child.”

She became belligerent at once. “Dane, I will not have my father or my family or anybody dictate to me what I shall do or how I shall live. I will not have you think of them. And besides, do they have to know? Aren’t we equal to keeping this to ourselves? I shall not tell a soul, not a single one. I’m fond of several women, but I would not trust one of them to keep a love secret. We can manage here perfectly well. Nobody at Mac’s knows what I do or where I go. I never began by telling them. Nobody there will ever spy on me.”

“How long had you thought of staying in Dargaville?”

“Why—I—when I came I thought of two years.”

"What do you propose to do with me at the end of that time?"

She looked away from him and did not answer.

"Did you put anything about time into your ceremony the other night?"

She did not answer.

"What did you put into that ceremony, Valerie?"

"I shan't tell you."

A smile spread over his face and lit it up as a field of golden grain lights up a brown hillside. She was so glad to see it that she flung her arms round him. But he responded only soberly, and with a very chaste kiss, and she sat up again.

With a comical resigned air he took out his pipe and began to smoke. She knew perfectly well that the question was not settled between them, but she did not know what was in his mind. She began to smoke too, and they were quiet for a while.

"Valerie, I want you to think about marrying me," he said very softly, at length.

"I can't avoid thinking about it now," she answered, but her tone was not as compliant as it might have been.

"I want to know just one thing more to-night. Is it anything about me that you're afraid of?" He looked into her face as he said it.

"Why, I love you, Dane. I couldn't possibly love you if I were afraid of you."

"You're quite sure? It's not personal at all?"

"No, it is not! Good heavens! What is the matter with this world that nobody ever can believe that I have a principle, an idea I want to live by! I'm not the first woman in the world who didn't want to marry, and yet everybody treats me as if I were. I'm not the first woman to say I want a career and a lover instead of husband and

children. Women have been acting that all down the ages, and yet I have to scream and yell and fight to make anyone take any notice of me. And you who have been all round the world, I have to shout it at you. Will you understand me? I'm not domestic. I do not want to darn your socks. I do not want to put your slippers by the fire. I do not want to put buttons on your shirts. I do not want children. I'm probably a horrid unnatural brute, but I did not make myself, and I can't make myself like the women who want to do these things. I do want to love you. I do want to play the piano to you. I do want to talk to you. I do want to rest you. I do want to help you to forget the things in life you don't like. And I do want—I do want—to take—some of the pain out of your eyes——” Her voice broke, and she dropped her head in her hands.

For some seconds the only sound in the night was that of little fishes sporting around them in the shallow water.

Then Dane leaned towards her and kissed her neck and the back of her bowed head.

“Valerie, it's just because you are what you are that I love you. And we won't talk any more to-night.”

### III

He was sorry to see when he walked into the office on Friday morning that she looked as if she had lain awake a good deal. He had himself in the meanwhile made up his mind that all his powers of persuasion should be used to get her to marry him. Though he despised the marriage ceremony as much as she did for the things it was used to cover he had a wholesome respect for it as a convenience in a crazy world. And he had never had any idea

of carrying on a clandestine love affair with her with the danger he knew there was of being found out in a small place. And then he wanted her in peace, he wanted her with him. He wanted so much more than sex from her.

They greeted each other as they always did with impersonal warmth and were immediately plunged into the rush of the day. It was not till six o'clock, after the staff had all left that they were alone.

"Have you to work to-night?" he asked.

"Yes, but only for an hour and a half. What about you?"

"Oh, I've finished up with Johnson. So I'm going home. Shall you be able to come out on the river to-morrow afternoon?"

"Yes," but she was disappointed that he said nothing of that evening.

"Good. I'd like to take you down towards Aoroa. Meet me by that bit of bush half a mile below Mac's. You know it?"

"Yes, I know it."

"All right. Be there by three."

"Are you going now?"

"Yes, I'm going home. Good-night." He kissed her lightly, smiled airily at her, and saluted her as he went past the counter. She stood up to watch him cross the street and get into the *Diana* and go off upstream.

As she ate her dinner and as she worked afterwards in the office she kept thinking he would come back. But he did not come back.

They met each other, however, gaily enough the next day, and she was delighted to find he showed no inclination to talk seriously. As the day was cool and showery she wore a tweed suit and carried a cloak as well, and he had on a light oilskin. The wind was strong at times and as

they ran into the broader stretches the spray flecked their faces.

Valerie drew the fresh air into her lungs and felt relaxed. She was interested in seeing a part of the river she had not yet observed. With delight she watched Dane who always took a keen pleasure in getting what he could out of his engine, and who loved this inanimate thing of his that had brought him so much enjoyment. At intervals he turned and smiled at her, and she began to anticipate the evening and the charm of his old house. She was a little surprised to find he was going a good way down the river, and then that later on he headed the launch into a small sheltered bay with scattered bush about it.

"I thought it would be nice if we had a fire and a picnic here," he said. "I brought food. We may have another shower, but a little damp won't hurt you, will it?"

"Oh dear, no," and she entered into the spirit of it willingly enough, though she had a vague feeling that she was being managed to some end.

The night came upon them before they had finished their meal. Dane piled driftwood upon the fire. They sat side by side to smoke with their arms about each other. They both knew they were shelving the subject they most wanted to talk about. And they were both irritated to think they would not have real peace again with each other till they had talked it out. A shower drove them to cover. But he did not suggest the cabin of the *Diana*, the one place where they would have kept dry. He drew her under a puriri tree, and they stood close together trying to avoid the drops. She began to see that he had no intention of taking her home with him that night.

"Well," he began abruptly as they stood lit up occasionally by the sputtering flames of the fire, "have you thought about marrying me?"

"Of course I've thought about it."

"It's stopped raining." He led the way back to the fire and respread a dry rug on the ground near.

"What's the trouble, Valerie? We have to understand each other before we go any further, and I cannot see at all why you cannot go through the marriage ceremony with me. I know as well as you do that it is properly only a matter for statisticians. But you and I are too conspicuous to carry on any love affair without being found out."

"Well, what on earth can they do to us if we are found out? I would have to leave the *News*, of course. But you said, didn't you, that you wanted me to live with you?"

"As my wife, yes indeed."

"You mean ——"

"I mean, my dear, that I'm not going to be happy about having you come there often in any other way. I don't wish to be selfish in this business, but have you thought of me at all? Have you thought what it would look like if with my reputation I allowed you to come and live with me, or allowed you to become openly compromised with me? Of course I forgot it all myself last Saturday. I shall forget it again if you make me. But I do remember, however mad it may make you to hear it, that your father was the first man to call on me and to ask me to dine with him when I came up disgraced from Christchurch, and he is my lawyer. He might prefer a love affair to marriage if we could keep it quiet. But we couldn't keep it quiet. I know the conventions of the world, my dear. It's being found out that matters. But why are you so serious about the blooming ceremony? You are being conventional about it, not I. Why can't we go through it and then ignore it and live by our own ceremony. That is the intelligent way to take it, child."

She stared into the fire saying nothing.

"Valerie, I have to know what is in your mind about this. What are you afraid of?"

"Dane, I lived with somebody else once."

"I have wondered if you had."

"You have!"

"Yes. Why, you haven't been afraid to tell me that, have you?"

"No, not exactly afraid. But—will that—do you still wish to marry me?"

"Are you trying to be funny, or what?"

She turned from the fire to look steadily into his face.

"It would be all right to put that question to a boy of twenty-one, if you had been rotten enough to let a boy of twenty-one fall in love with you without being told it, but to put it to me is ridiculous. You know, I'm beginning to see that you are not as unconventional as you think you are; that was an absurdly conventional question, and it had behind it assumptions that I am an intolerant and hypocritical blockhead."

Her face broke into a smile.

"Yes, for God's sake let's laugh at ourselves. This seriousness is awful."

"How old are you?" she asked abruptly.

"Thirty-seven, and old and full of days at that."

"I'm twenty-six."

"And absurdly young for that."

"I am not."

"Well, you seem so to me, but I like you that way."

He lit a cigarette for her and drew the rug about her. The wind had gone down, and the night was fresh but not cold. The growing crescent moon peered down at them through a space between two trees.



"Haven't you a good deal more to say?" he asked presently, with a teasing smile.

"Look here, you're not going to laugh me into marrying you, you know," she said fiercely.

"I know no better way."

She caught his nearest hand and kissed it, and continued to hold it between her own.

"I suppose I am being too serious," she said thoughtfully. "But that other affair taught me a lot. It all went wrong, you see. I don't know now how I ever came to begin. It only lasted three months, and it is all over and done with."

"Is it really? I didn't know that anything was ever over and done with."

"Oh, now, you know what I mean."

"Yes, I won't interrupt. Go on."

"Well, then, because we hadn't married, we got out of it without any trouble."

Dane took his pipe out of his mouth and waited a moment before he spoke.

"Really? You got out of it without any trouble? Then it must have been a highly immoral relation, without a scrap of feeling on either side."

"I see. Of course I don't mean it that way."

"No, you meant that you didn't have to go through the business of getting a divorce."

"Yes."

"And you don't want to marry me because you're sure it won't last long and that you will wish to leave me or I you."

"Oh, I'm not sure of anything. Oh dear, why do we have to talk about it?" She dropped her head in her hands again.

"Yes, I think it's a beastly bore myself. It would be

so much pleasanter to drift on with our thumbs to our noses, and much more exciting, and incidentally that end you are anticipating so seriously would be much nearer."

He relit his pipe and went on smoking. Then he got up and put more wood on the fire, and after raking in the straggled pieces, he stood looking down at her. The fitful light showed him that her face was absurdly troubled and serious. He dropped down beside her and laid his pipe on the ground.

"Valerie, I ask you to go through the marriage ceremony with me because it will save us a lot of trouble. I don't attach any more meaning to the damned thing than you do. Everybody jeers at it to-day; I mean everybody with any knowledge of human beings, and uses it merely as a passport, and it happens to be a perfectly good passport. I'm one with you in making our own ceremony, the thing we shall live by, or try to live by, the thing that shall be at least a living force to us. Now take your own objections to marriage. You don't have to be domestic for me. The boys run my house much better than you could. You don't have to look after me when I am nervous—or seedy. I much prefer that you should not. I don't ask you to change your ways and I don't propose to change mine for you. And then—I'm not asking you to have children. I have always wanted kids, but somehow I have always cared for women who did not. I have to accept that ——"

"Oh, Dane, I cannot help it," she broke in angrily. "Don't you suppose that if I could be different I would? Do you think I've had an easy life trying to be myself? If I'm not to be myself what the devil am I to be? A shadow of my mother, my father, my sisters, my aunts? What? If I could be a nice plump purring bovine senti-

mental ass, slobbered over by men and called 'that sweet thing,' everybody would let me alone. But I can't be that thing. I look at women like that and they make me sick. I'm sorry I don't want children, but I don't want them. I'm afraid of them. Children do awful things to you. There are two things in this world that kill courage in people, children and possessions. And I won't have either of them. The terrible thing about possessions is that once you acquire them you will sell your soul to keep them, and the terrible thing about children is that you want possessions for them you never had for yourself, and so you get fears for them you never had for yourself."

"Yes, a number of the old religious orders had that idea."

"I don't care who had it. I've learned it from watching the people about me. All the fight goes out of people when they get a house and furniture and a child or two. I mean the fight about ideas. Of course they fight more than ever for a bigger house and more furniture."

"All right, dear. What has all that got to do with marrying me? We've settled the children, and my possessions are willed to the Sydney Museum. Under no circumstances can you have them. I've only just enough income to feed you. I shall have to work overtime to buy you jewellery——"

Valerie laughed helplessly.

"Oh, Dane, what am I to do with you? You don't see it at all. I want to go on with my work. I want to stay on the paper."

"Well, stay on it, if you want to, as long as you want to. And, my dear child, I'm not supposing we are any different from lots of other people. Love will change with us, and if it becomes something you want no longer, well, I want you to understand that you will be free to go. I

couldn't bear to have anything near me that did not wish to stay. And when you wish it you will find nothing easier than getting a divorce from me."

"Oh, please, please ——"

"Why am I not to mention the thing that is looming largest in your mind? I wish to impress on you that the things you are afraid of are the least of this business between you and me. The marriage ceremony, the divorce, mere forms easily managed for people like us. But you seem to be overlooking the real thing. I'm not asking you to do any more than you are now committed to doing. You want to live with me for a time. You don't know how long, and I'm sure I don't. You've fallen in love with me, and you have told yourself that if love came to you as you wanted it you would have it. I think you're quite right, and I hope I'm going to be happy because it happened to be me. And I know that because you are what you are, you are going to be chained far more by your own compulsions than you are by any formal ceremony. Now, since you have let yourself in for the big thing, why on earth be so serious about the little one?"

He put an arm about her shoulder and stared up at the moon.

"Please don't think I don't respect your stand," he went on. "It's a far bigger thing to have your own unwritten laws and to live by them than it is to be swayed by mere convention. You could stand in the middle of the ruin of convention and keep your ideals. You would not succumb as so many so-called virtuous women succumb on board ship, or in the islands, or in places where conventions have lapsed, simply because everybody was running amuck around you. All I'm asking of you is that we do the thing that will help us to keep this relation fine as long as possible here. And there can be only one reason now

why you won't do it, and that, because you don't trust me."

He took her face in his hands and held it and looked into it.

She was not sure whether she did or not, but she could never have looked into his eyes and said she did not. She knew well enough that he had every intention then of being decent if their relation broke up, but love was such a queer thing, it could fight so desperately and to the last ditch to preserve itself, as she had learned. However, it was to his intention that she answered.

"I do trust you. It isn't that."

He dropped her face and with a quick movement got to his feet, filled now with resentment at the stubborn fighter in her. He looked up at the west where clouds were mounting to the zenith.

"It's going to rain again. I'd better take you back."

Hurt by a sense of misunderstanding they both got silently into the launch. He carefully arranged every protection against the coming shower, insisting that she take the whole of the rug. He lit the lantern at the bow and headed out into the river.

The trouble was that Valerie could not let go all at once the things she had been telling herself for years. It seemed to her it would be a weak thing to succumb to the first attack. And it must be confessed that she would have loved to put up a fight and stand with Dane against the world. She was young enough and reckless enough to love the idea of it. She did not see then that the fundamental difference between them was that she was a fighter and thought a great deal worth fighting for, whereas he was not a fighter and thought little worth a row.

And then she was much too sure of herself. She was inclined to overrate her accomplishment in this matter of

herself versus the world, to discount the support she had received from certain factors in her life. She had had, and always would have in her own country, the loyalty of her class whether she wanted it or not, and the power of money to shut mouths. She had never had the poverty that forces one to hunt for bread against prejudice. She had had added to the force of her own personality the glamour of her set, despise it as she might.

And Dane saw this very clearly, and was annoyed that a girl of her perceptions did not see it as he did. He was angry now that they had had to have all this talk when he had wanted merely to feel. And then he was chagrined that she could stand like that against him.

He made no response at first when she put her arm round him. She had to withdraw it when the shower descended upon them.

"You'd better go into the cabin," he said.

"I don't want to. I won't get wet."

In spite of the cloud between them they rather enjoyed the speeding of the launch through the rain. Dane drove recklessly, but the river was wide here and he knew it well. For a time the stars and the moon were blotted out and the Wairoa was a stretch of blackness in a world only a shade less dark. He began to feel less irritable. After all, he did not believe she would resist him much longer.

She sat trying to think over all he had said, and over some of the things that had not yet been said at all. She began to see that she had been thinking far more of her wishes and her convictions than of his. Indeed, she saw with a pang of self-accusation that she had been thinking mostly of herself.

The shower passed, and the moon and stars came out the clearer for the freshening of the atmosphere. Valerie shook the rug and assured Dane that she was not wet.

Then in readjusting it she sat as close to him as she could and put her arm about him once more. He tried to steel himself against response. He wondered if she suspected his resolution and was trying to undermine it. He tried to think of something else, but the vision of her going with him into his old house began to obsess him. In spite of the cool night they grew warm sitting side by side. But he told himself this would never do, and he whipped up his courage and resolution, and when they came opposite the southern end of Dargaville he spoke the first word that had been spoken for some time and asked her where he should land her.

She did not answer for a minute. "Oh anywhere," she said very coldly, moving away from him.

The *Diana* ran on for some distance before she came to a standstill near the bank.

Valerie stood up at once without a word, letting the rug fall at her feet, and she moved towards the centre of the boat.

Dane gave up at once. He restarted the engine and swung the launch back into midstream. Then he moved forward to Valerie who had stopped by the cabin.

"Will you please land me here at once," she said, in a voice shaken with anger and humiliation.

"I will not. Not now," he said, as his arms went round her.

#### IV

"Dane, would it hurt you to tell me that tale? I'd like to know the truth about it."

"The truth?" He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "I won't promise you the truth. But I could give you my version."

"That will do," she said.

It was Sunday afternoon a week later. They were sitting on the top of the range behind his house with a fine view spread out before them. The showery weather had cleared the air, and the day was fresh and crystalline. The two Airedales were skirmishing around them.

Dane looked off into space for some minutes.

"What a fool one can be," he said, half to himself. Then he looked at Valerie, who like himself was hatless, lounging easily on the grass-tufted rock beside him.

She flashed a merry look at him. "Go on then with the tale of a fool."

"I don't know where to begin. It was always the tale of a fool. You see, I've never known what to do with your sex."

"I haven't noticed any deficiency in that direction."

"You will, before you're finished with me."

"Look here, you always put it that way, as if I were managing this business."

"You are, Miss Superman."

"Dane, I will not be compared with that dreadful creature. But please, tell me the story. It doesn't hurt you any more, does it?" She put out a hand which he took and kissed.

"No, not now." He put more tobacco into the bowl of his pipe, and then as if changing his mind put it down on the ground, and drew up his knees.

"You know the names of the women concerned, I suppose."

"The Golden and Denisthorne are the only ones I know. Were there any more?"

"No. Those are enough. My wife had met Mrs. Golden in Sydney, and liked her, God knows why, and when we came over to Christchurch the Golden met us,



and invited us to dinner. Things were going wrong, indeed had been for some time between my wife and myself. I didn't care about the people she seemed to like, and I didn't like the Goldenes, either of them, but I went, and at that first dinner we met the Denisthorne. I liked them both and we began to meet them everywhere around. Mrs. Denisthorne attracted me a good deal, and I knew I attracted her. I thought I was being careful—and then Denisthorne had to go to America."

Dane picked up a stone and threw it down the hillside and watched it land in the head of a tree-fern.

"My wife and I had come to a stage where we could not go on. I did not know till afterwards that she had fallen in love with a rich Melbourne man, and that she was only too glad of an excuse to leave me and go back to Australia. And I think that before she went she must have asked Mrs. Golden to keep an eye on me. Mrs. Golden had been doing that. I suppose a man is a cad to belittle a woman who gets infatuated about him. I have tried to see the Mrs. Goldenes of the world as a doctor sees them. But it isn't easy. I would as soon be in a room with a boa constrictor smiling pleasantly at me as I would with Mrs. Golden. She was clever enough while my wife was there not to let her see anything. After she was gone she went off her head. She kept on sending me invitations which I never accepted, but the trouble was, as they were at the head of everything, I kept meeting them everywhere. And she was very hospitable to Mrs. Denisthorne. Phew! She was a devil.

"Well, dear, Mrs. Denisthorne and I fell down, of course. I've nothing to say for myself. I wanted her. My marriage had been very unhappy. It had been a penance. Serves me right. I went into those things without thinking. And so I cared a lot about Mrs. Denis-

thorne. She was very charming. I saw she was afraid of Mrs. Golden. It seems that Mrs. Golden had wanted Denisthorne herself years before. In fact, she seems to have wanted almost everybody. You can see the situation. She had been lying in wait to get back at Mrs. Denisthorne. And my wife came back and sued me for divorce, and Denisthorne came back ——”

Dane paused for a few seconds.

“No man has ever made me feel such a beastly rotter as Denisthorne did. It always hurts me to think of it. He understood too much. He forgave his wife. He forgave me. And he cared, cared awfully. He begged me to let the thing go through without a fight. It would have been silly to fight, anyway. We had been too well trapped. So it went through quietly. The papers printed nothing but the bare fact. I saw Denisthorne wanted his wife, and I saw she really wanted him. I told him I would get out quietly. But I reckoned without Mrs. Golden. And this is where the rest of the story begins.

“I was living in the Manipouri Hotel. One wet afternoon I went out of my room leaving it unlocked, and went to the room of an Australian who had just come, to plan with him that Lake Ada walking trip, which I wanted to do before I left the south. I yarned with him about two hours, and we drank, drank too much, and I had been pretty reckless for some time. It was well after six o'clock when I remembered I had to go out to an early dinner with some newspaper men. I went back to my rooms and found Mrs. Golden there. What I ever did to that woman to make her so mad I do not know. I had been courteous to her, but I swear I never gave her the least encouragement. I couldn't. She was the last thing in the world I could bear. She was fat and gross! Horrible! Rapacious! And somehow she had gone mad about

me. I suppose I was a cad. Certainly I was a God-damned fool. When I saw her come grinning at me I must have let her see what I thought of her. I'd had enough whisky to make me reckless. And no woman could ever forgive that, I know. I told her to get out at once, and when she didn't, I did the unpardonable thing. I went down to the office. The manager happened to be there, and I swore at him and the clerks for allowing a woman to go up to my rooms, and I told him to go and get her out. He didn't know who it was, and he went.

"No man in his senses would have behaved as I did, and of course I deserved to pay. Well, I don't know what passed between the manager and Mrs. Golden, but when I tell you that Golden was one of the owners of the hotel, a little fact I did not know, you will see things. As I thought about it afterwards, I saw that being the kind of thing she was she could not trust me. So her idea was to get in first and do it quickly. What she told her husband I don't know. Anyway I went off in blissful ignorance with the Australian the next day, and was away nearly a month and then I left him to go on to Dunedin while I went back to Christchurch. As we had been wandering about in the wilds I had heard nothing. I was met by the hotel manager who told me he was very sorry, but I could not stay in the hotel. I've never been so staggered in my life. I hunted up a journalist and wormed the whole story out of him. I suppose you know it. It was that I lured Mrs. Golden to my rooms when I was drunk, that I behaved disgustingly and practically assaulted her, and that I had been blackballed out of my club in consequence.

"Well, dear, I couldn't take it in, not at all. Of course one hears that things like this happen. But to see myself the monster that rumour was painting me, well, it made me feel queer. I thought I was going mad. I told my

friends what had happened and that I had the Australian as witness as to what time I went back to my room, and they believed me and started counter stories. And a few men advised me to fight it. Fight it! My God! What a sweet mess it would have been to air in the courts! And I had no money to fight it, and the Goldens were among the richest people in the country. And then I didn't care. What was I to fight it for? The few men I cared about believed me, and to my astonishment Denisthorpe was one of those who offered to lend me money. But all I wanted was to get away from that damned crowd and never have anything to do with their kind again. And then I saw I didn't really care about them. I had imposed them on myself.

"But the thing did hurt me, absurdly so, it seems now. It was the malignancy in it, the willingness of so many people to come down on me, people I had never hurt, people I had never seen, the men who blackballed me out of that club, and it made me think all the more of the ones who stood by me. But it hit me hard. I had never passed a rumour on, or tried to disturb any man's dreams of himself, and I had never allowed any woman to care for me if I was not prepared to see her through. And it all seemed so unfair. God knows I was glad to run away from it. I came up to Auckland. I was bitter and lonely and horribly sensitive about the whole thing. I wondered if the hotels would take me. I shall never forget my feeling as I went into the Star and gave my name. But they did, and the next day your father called on me and dined with me there. And I found the newspapermen had been written to by the fellows in Christchurch, and I was not without friends. That ought to have balanced me. But it didn't seem as if anyone could help me. It was something I had to do for myself. I didn't want to meet any-

one. I drifted on to the Bay of Islands and to Hokianga as if I were looking for something to pull me up.

"One night in a little pub at Hokianga I struck an Englishman, a strange chap. I don't know what he had fled from. I never got near him. I can't account for him at all. He didn't drink to excess. He didn't gamble. He didn't have anything to do with any woman about. He apparently had a little money. He asked me to go home with him. I went. I stayed with him for four months. I was ill at first and he looked after me. Then I worked on his run with him. He was fattening cattle and clearing quite a large place. He wasn't far from the Hokianga harbour. You know it? Well, I used to wander about it at night, and I think that it more than anything else brought me back to the world. I'd carried a pistol for some time, and had come near to using it. One night I sat on a little beach. It was a full moon and that harbour was the spirit of beauty itself. And I told myself it was a grand night and a grand place to die with or to come to some conclusion about living. It was funny how I did it. One can be such an incurable idiot! I sat down, and on one side of me I made a heap of pebbles each named with something I cared to live for, books I had not read, places I wanted to see, and so on, and on the other I put the stones named for the reasons for not living. It will amuse you to know I called one of them 'women.' Well, I was astonished to see that the arguments for going on were much more numerous than the arguments for shooting myself on the spot. I threw the pistol into the harbour and decided to go on. It gave me a curious feeling for days to go about thinking that I might have been dead, and that the thing was in my hands, and that I had put a real issue up to myself. I had drifted along so much of my life. I had a strange exhilaration. And so

I came back to work and life, and now that you are going to marry me, Valerie dear—what! You are crying over that?”

He swung towards her and pulled her into his arms and kissed her wet eyes.

“Good Lord, my dear. It’s nothing to cry about on a spring afternoon. It’s funny, very funny to me now. Was it your vibrations wandering about the universe, I wonder, that caught me that night? Who knows? Oh, kiss me, old girl, and stop crying, for God’s sake.”

## CHAPTER XIV.

### I

“**W**ELL, that's the last of it, thank God, and you're no more pleased than I am, Johnson. And it's a topping good job you've done.”

The weary jobbing man's face lit up with a pleased smile at Dane's words.

They stood with Valerie and Ryder and Jimmy beside the jobbing machine which five minutes before had run off the last inset ready now to go out with the paper on Monday. It was the Saturday night before the election, which did not take place till the following Thursday, but it was the last inset and the last chance for special pleading because the voting laws of New Zealand have certain regulations peculiar to that land.

With the idea that the voter shall have a period of comparative peace in which to sum up the arguments he has heard, nothing of a coercive nature, nothing designed to agitate his meditative mind, is allowed to be printed in any paper or displayed in any shape or form for two days prior to the polls. The candidates and their official representatives may deliver their speeches up till election eve, but the newspapers may only report them as said without comment. Straight news may be printed, but also without comment. So that the Monday was Dane's last chance to swerve the wavering mind. And he had done his most humorous and pungent best in the editorial and in the inset, and in putting into shape the notes Bob had sent in from the field.

The pile of insets made a brilliant bit of colour in the drab composing-room, for Dane had insisted on a red sheet

for his last fling. In spite of Valerie's fears that it would look bizarre it was a fine and arresting piece of printing, set up and balanced in Johnson's best style, and as far as Dane was concerned its arguments were as hot as its colour. He had spent the best part of a day on it. It was mainly an appeal to labour, the labour of the bushes and the mills, and it delicately flattered the workingman by appealing to his intelligence as well as to his emotions. It had cleverly gathered up every good thing that could be said for a change; it neatly recorded the main deficiencies of the Liberal Party in the matter of promises to the worker, but above all it appealed to the northerner to get attention for the land he had made his own.

"That ought to make 'em sit up," said Ryder in his dry way as he looked at Dane. Both he and Johnson had come to enormously admire him, not only because of his work, which they were quite capable of appreciating, but even more because of the way he had gone about the office. Indeed, the little group was a good deal of a mutual admiration society as it stood there with the curious hesitancy of people who have seen each other through a considerable piece of work with brains and patience and humour, and want to say something about it, but do not know what to say. The feeling seemed to centre about Dane because he was there for the last time in the place of Bob who would be back in his old chair on the Monday morning.

Jimmy gazed at his elders in turn with a boundless admiration and pride in the fact that he was here in at the finish with the rest of them. He had got over his first antipathy to Dane. No boy could have held out long against the subtle flattery of the man's approval. For Dane took a huge joy in Jimmy, and of them all he most established the boy as man in his own eyes, for he never ordered him about, and he asked his opinion about weighty



matters and had once even taken his advice. Indeed, of them all, Dane most clearly perceived the value in the universal cosmos of that which Jimmy was—the exuberant start of fresh vitality into a devitalized world.

Dane gave a last look round the composing-room remembering the occasion on which he had seen it first. He did not look at Valerie, but turned to the men who had reached for their coats.

“I’m leaving to-night. Will you come along and have a drink?” He felt it pathetic that that was all he could say to them.

But Ryder and Johnson did not find it pathetic. They were very thirsty.

## II

Many things combined to make that week the most exciting election period that Dargaville had ever known. The whole country was stirred by the possibility, loudly voiced by the Massey Party, that a change was at hand, and that the old Liberal Party which Dick Seddon raised to Empire fame was doomed to an imminent fall. Sir Joseph Ward, one of the cleverest financiers the dominion had known, was attacked for lack of any policy, and his side found little to say to stem the disrupting tide. Every vote was appealed to as it never had been before. Labour, the farmers, the landowners, the women, the factory hands, the city workers, the capitalists, the prohibitionists, the civil service were all alike appealed to to put new life in the country and a new man in the lead.

And the Far North in particular was roused out of a long apathy by the energetic campaigns being waged there by the three Massey candidates. Haines, of Marsden, was a tireless fighter with every chance of going in for the third time. The Bay of Islands man Sloan, up like

Roger for the first time, had a good chance against a weak rival, and it was now well known that Roger Benton, who had the hardest row to hoe, had the best chance any man had ever had against Mobray, the old Seddon lion. And so it was that to the delight of the North Mr. Massey gave it his last week, having no need to speak for himself in his own electorate, or about Auckland, which was his stronghold. And to the everlasting pride of Dargaville, he was to make his last speech there on election eve itself.

The two days of meditation and prayer allowed by the laws hardly sufficed to cool the heads of an electorate that had been bombarded with literature and canvassed from house to house many times over into its remotest back-block by all the parties in turn. The dear, gentle, old lady who is the object of such solicitude at elections never lost her sense of fluster in spite of the benign intentions of paternal legislation. And though the blatant voice of the last moment agitator was silent throughout the land there was in those last two days a tremulous tenseness in the air, remarked by the oldest inhabitant of every settlement as something unprecedented in his whole experience.

There was indeed little let down in those days for Valerie. On the Monday morning Roger held his final committee meeting in the office. Neither he nor anyone else could think of an important thing that was not covered. The final details for the Massey meeting and for the dinner to him at Mac's on the Wednesday night were gone over. The arrangements for that night's meeting at Aratapu and Tuesday's at Te Koperu were scanned for oversights. Dane's last leader and inset were loudly praised. But though the committee found their labours practically over the little office hummed with news pouring in by telegram from all over the country, much more news than could be got into the available space, so that it had to be

condensed or rewritten. This was where Valerie missed Dane, for Bob was back on the paper that week with the one job on his hands of reporting and writing up the meetings at night, and of helping Roger to prepare his remarks for the same.

Valerie had refused to see Dane the day before and he had told her he would not come into the town that week, but that he would look for her at the week-end. She had wondered in her only leisure moments as she dressed or bathed whether he could keep out of the excitement, for as the great day approached it captured even her, and when Roger invited her to be present at the Massey dinner she found she really did wish to be in the fun. She wondered if Dane would be there, for she was sure he would be asked to go.

The night was, for those who like that kind of thing, an unforgettable affair. As Valerie stood in her room before the dinner, trying to bathe the signs of utter weariness from her face, she heard an exciting tooting of horns and a great fuss down in the street, and guessed that Mr. Massey and his party were arriving from Whangarei. The town seemed to swirl about the hotel. It had been alive all the afternoon with people coming up the river and down the river and across the river and in by train to hear the man who had been the spine of the country party for twenty years. If she had not been so tired, Valerie would have run to the sitting-room to look out, but instead she lay down on her bed for a brief rest.

To her great disappointment there was no sign of Dane at the dinner. Besides herself Mrs. Benton was the only woman present. It had been found impossible to invite women and have room also for the number of men Roger wished to have. No one could object to Mrs. Benton, and of course Valerie was the omnipotent press. She tried to

put Dane out of her mind and to enjoy the scene for the expression that it was of a certain side of the male animal. She was amused at the extraordinary emphasis put on politics, on last moment cheerfulness, on forced sensations of every kind. Good fellowship roared itself hoarse at that dinner. Promises enough to bring millenniums to a dozen suffering worlds were scattered about with light-hearted prodigality. It was a gorgeous orgy of optimism. And she looked on at it as she had looked on at family Christmas dinners with a heart cold and a mind aloof. One hour of life with Dane, she thought, was worth a thousand such revels as this.

The meeting afterwards, however, did move her. Mr. Massey had never spoken better in his whole career. For twenty years the Opposition leader had led what was for years a forlorn hope, had fought with extraordinary courage and perseverance a dogged fight against the most powerful premier the country had ever had, and yet he could talk to that packed hall as if life had been for him an unchallenged success. And when the audience rose at him and began to throw up hats and sticks and break the chairs she found she was swirling with it. But the thing that stirred her most was his reference, when speaking of the local situation, to the brilliant work of the little *News*. And she found herself flushing furiously when heads were turned and nodded at her. She wondered if Dane were there somewhere listening amused and apart.

The meeting was not over till after eleven o'clock, and then there was the ceremony of seeing Mr. Massey and his party off in three motor cars for Te Koperu, where they were to cross the river and go on by cars to Auckland, riding all through the night. This over, Valerie had but one idea, to get to bed, to take aspirin, and to blot it all out, for she knew the next day and night would be

even more strenuous. She slipped away from Mrs. Benton, who was staying the night with the Boltons, and she entered the hotel by the side door.

The whole house was ablaze with light and excitement except at the public bars, which in accordance with the law were all in darkness.

As she went up the stairs she stopped electrified. A clear tenor voice rang out above the din, singing a toast. It was followed by a little lull before the tumult drowned it out again.

For a moment she felt a sense of shock and she could not move. Then she went on into her room and stood again in the middle of it, listening. She was no longer weary. She was feverishly alive, burning with hurts, resentments, and futile determinations. She did not know why she was hurt, what she was resentful at, or what she was determined to do. She stood by the window for some minutes till these clashing pains diminished a little.

It took her some time to get hold of herself, and then she told herself she was a fool. There was hardly a man in the town who might not be excused for letting go that night. Mrs. Benton had left Roger to the overwhelming pressure of the occasion without a sign that it worried her. But still she could not bear to think of Dane as drunk. It hurt him more than it hurt other men. She felt he hated himself afterwards, that he could not take it lightly as others did. But she told herself the main trouble was her own imagination, which could not bear to visualize him degenerated in any way from the beautiful thing he was to her when he was well. She could not bear, either, the clouding in any shape or form of the spirit that was in him. It was her sense of beauty, rather than her code of behaviour, that was offended. But her sense of beauty was perhaps the strongest thing about her. It

was at the back of all her protests, all her revolts. And her sense of fairness had many a clash with it.

She got through her window and began to pace the balcony. She stopped at times when a louder burst of laughter drifted up to her, or some strong voice was raised in a maudlin challenge. She was prepared to hear Dane's voice above the noise again, but it did not rise to her. She tried to talk herself out of her mood of hesitancy and speculation. She tried to imagine what was going on down in those closed rooms. She would have liked to see how Mac managed his motley world on an occasion like this, to know who was being put out in those rooms off the yard, to know what he did to keep the constable out of the way, to know whether Doc Steele succumbed, whether Bob was drunk. It was a strange atmosphere, and apart from the servants she was the only woman in it. She was surprised to find that her thoughts had carried her out of her first unhappiness about Dane.

Feeling hungry she wondered if she could get unseen down to the kitchen. There was a fire-escape stair leading from the top hall outside down into the yard. The door was unlocked from the inside. She stole down the steps. She could hear men talking off somewhere in the shadows of the buildings, but the kitchen was empty when she looked in. There was plenty of food lying openly about, and she knew she could have what she wanted. She got bread and butter, and was cutting herself some cold chicken when Mac walked in followed by Dane.

"You see I'm stealing," she said at once to Mac, hoping he would think her sudden flush was caused by the idea of being caught.

The big Irishman's eyes were a little bloodshot, but he was the coolest man in the house. He got the full significance of the way in which Dane moved up to Valerie.

"Go ahead. Take all you want," he said, and turning walked out and down the hall.

Dane took Valerie by the arm. "Where have you been?" he asked in an aggrieved tone, as if she had been eluding him. "I didn't see you at the meeting."

As she saw someone cross the hall she drew quickly back. "Don't, please, Dane. Someone might come in." Her tone was sharper than she meant it to be.

"Oh, you are angry with me," he said pathetically. "Don't be angry with me."

It was astonishing what an appeal he could put into his voice. His eyes looked at her softened out of their accustomed brilliancy by a slumbrous cloudiness. She wondered just how conscious he was of her and of the situation.

"I'm not angry, Dane."

"Yes, you are. I feel it. What is it?" He moved up to her and took her arm again.

She saw the forms of two men in the hall. She thought they were coming towards the kitchen.

"Dane, please, somebody is coming. I cannot stay and talk to you here." She took up her plate. "I must go. Good-night."

She hurried out of the kitchen by the back door, half hoping and half fearing that he would follow her. But he did not. Up in her room she tried not to be too serious about it. It was nothing more than she had known, nothing more than she told herself she had to accept with him either as a lover or as a husband. She was determined not to let his weaknesses blind her to the other qualities he possessed.

Finding there was hot water, she soothed herself with a bath, ate her supper, and even without the aid of aspirin fell asleep.

## III

When she reached the office at half-past nine, very late for her, Bob was there furiously pounding out his report of the Massey meeting and dinner, which Jimmy took sheet by sheet to the composing-room. Bob gave Valerie rather a wan smile, but she gave no sign that she noticed the circles under his eyes. She wondered if he and Dane had met in the bibulous meanderings of the night, and what they had said to each other. As a matter of fact they had met at a stage when all men were swearing eternal friendship and finding the world full of dear brothers. But this Valerie never knew.

She looked at the big pile of telegrams already in, and settled down to it. It was a public holiday and the place did not wake up till ten o'clock. Then it came to life in an hour. The morning trains came in crowded with bush and country people out to take what fun might be going in the town. The shops were open for half a day for their benefit. As there was a constant stream of people going by the office Valerie suggested they post a bulletin of news to draw attention to themselves. Bob thought it a fine idea, and Jimmy was called upon to find a big sheet of cardboard and to do the pasting. In her clear hand Valerie wrote out in blue pencil the first most interesting items. Then at intervals during the day they watched Jimmy go out with a fresh sheet when several people had collected, and flourishing his paste brush solemnly cover up the stale news with the new, guying the lookers-on in his own cheeky fashion. The facts were such as election crowds feed on. It seemed that the weather was generally fine throughout the dominion (the crowd thought this very important and discussed it from various angles), that in the cities especially a heavy vote was rolling up early.



that Sir Joseph Ward was confident of victory, that Mr. Massey was confident of victory, that their wives were equally sure of victory, that the prohibition party was sure of national prohibition, that labour was sure of surprising gains, that everybody was sure of something or other. And the crowd watching Jimmy pasting this encouraging information cheered and was sure too.

Valerie grew interested in spite of weariness in the intensifying of the human spirit throughout that day. The office glowed with faces leaning over the counter and beaming down upon her and Bob, who had to exert all their good humour to avoid showing annoyance at the constant interruptions.

As she was changing her dress before dinner she heard steps come quickly to her door, and then a low knock. Throwing a wrapper about her she went to it, opened it a little way and peered through. Dane stood there looking ill and unhappy.

"Let me come in," he pleaded, as if it were a desperate business.

She was not sure whether he was sober or not, and she expected Bob to come to his room at any moment, but she opened the door at once, and then closed it quietly behind him. Dane faced her and looked at her as if he were asking for his life. He was fastidiously shaved, but his clothes were crumpled as if he had lain in them. His white skin showed patches of sallowness and his eyes were haunted by a fear that seemed to come out of them and twist his features. He knew he had been very drunk the night before. And ever since he had been able to think again, he had been tortured by the vague memory that he had seen Valerie somewhere in the night, and that he had been rude to her, and that she was very angry with *him*.

Even if she had been angry with him she would have melted at the misery in his face. Impulsively she flung her arms about him and crushed his face against her own.

"Whatever has happened to you, Dane? Cheer up, for heaven's sake."

He drew away, looking doubtfully at her.

"Aren't you angry with me?" he asked, in the manner of a penitent child.

Valerie had kicked herself more than once that day for her manner in the kitchen the night before. If she hadn't been so tired, she told herself, she would have handled the situation more lightly.

She looked at him, seeing much more than the reaction from a night's drinking in his eyes. And whatever she did or felt, she knew she must not fail this man in moments when he needed her understanding so desperately.

"I'm not angry with you, not the least little bit. I've nothing to be angry about. But I am dreadfully tired, dear. Perhaps that is what you feel."

She threw her arms about him again and put her lips on his.

"What is the matter, Dane? Please kiss me," she said, wondering why he did not respond. But he was in a difficult mood, confused, bruised and sick, and hating himself, he could not rise to showing care for anybody else.

They heard Bob come into the next room. Valerie wondered what she could do with Dane. She hated to let him go from her in the mood he was in.

"Are you going to stay here to-night?" she whispered.

"No. I'm going home now."

"Can you take me with you and get me back by nine?" She saw that he softened and came nearer to her.

"Yes; will you come?"

"I will. The break will help me to get through the night. Pick me up the other side of the railway wharf."

He looked better at once and slipped quietly out.

As she walked along towards the railway station to meet him she thought of the frenzied counting that had now begun behind locked doors all over the country, in remote schoolhouses, little town halls, creameries, and even private houses, where in the scattered settlements the government considered the convenience of those who had long distances to go. And in the larger centres she could visualize the groups checking and rechecking those columns of figures, so important to the careers of a few men, so unimportant in the great welter of world affairs. It seemed funny that those figures should matter so much.

She passed several people riding and driving in, and she sauntered slowly to let them all go by before she ran for the *Diana* which she could just see hidden in the rushes. She sat down in the stern with Dane and put an arm round him, and did not attempt to talk. He set his engine at full speed. Round the first turn they saw close upon them a big timber barque riding low, and being towed down on the evening tide, bound for Australia, the men on her decks curiously remote from the fuss of the New Zealand election. They would go out to sea that night oblivious of the results that seemed so epoch-making to the wrought-up feelings of Dargaville.

The sight of that stately vessel filigreed against an opal sky lifted part of the cloud from Dane's mind. As he ran the launch close past her the friendly faces of officers and seamen grinned down upon them.

Then, oblivious of the fact that men on the barque might be looking after them, he put his unoccupied arm about her and his head against her shoulder, and felt *better*.

Before he reached home he was trying to forget himself and to think entirely of her, for he saw how exhausted she was. He put her straight into his hammock, and it was there that she ate her dinner and stayed till it was time to go. She felt a good deal better by the time he landed her near the railway wharf.

## IV

The *News* office all in darkness seemed a strange place to Valerie as she passed it. It had been lit at night for so long. But its part in this drama was played. Aside from the fussing of a special night train that had recently come in, there was no sign of life about this end of the town. It was from the centre that the sounds of an excited, waiting crowd drifted along.

The election results were to be shown on a screen outside the second floor of Roger's store, which had the great advantage, placed as it was on the corner of Queen and River Streets, of facing the two main ways, of being near the post-office, and of being only one block away from the registrar's office to which the official results all went. Several of the rooms on the second floor had been cleared out to accommodate Roger's committee and supporters. It was about this building, and gazing feverishly at the screen for the first significant figures, that the largest crowd Dargaville had ever seen clustered good-humouredly.

As she walked on towards it Valerie heard those mild preliminary cheers accorded to the Royal Family and popular statesmen, whose pictures lantern men show before the real business of the evening begins. When she heard a louder and more rousing one she wondered if she had missed the first big announcement, but she saw it was the cheerful face of Mr. Massey that had stimulated the

extra roar. Quickening her steps, she saw Jimmy dash-  
ing across the street with the first important batch of  
telegrams, and in a plain white envelope the registrar's  
local figures for which the men upstairs were now fran-  
tically waiting. She darted after him and seized his arm.

The boy was bursting with delightful importance as  
the chief messenger of that eventful night. His most re-  
liable runners were stationed at the post-office to carry the  
press news and such private wires as came to Roger from  
his friends, but he himself had the great job; he carried  
the official messages direct from the registrar to Bob, the  
only figures on which the announcements were based.  
Jimmy had looked forward to this night as the greatest  
thing in his life, he knew not why. He tried to be cool,  
as became a man in a crisis, but Valerie saw with delight  
that he could hardly contain within himself the emotions  
that the occasion roused.

"What results, Jimmy?" she whispered hoarsely, as  
they hurried together down the side of the building to a  
back entrance.

"Nothing big out yet, Miss Carr. But I think this is  
Dargaville," and reverently he indicated the plain white  
envelope.

They went in by a door carefully guarded by several  
men, who smiled with the ready smile of friend passing  
friend on a day of great matters.

"Oh, it's grand, isn't it?" exploded Jimmy, half under  
his breath. "If only Benton and Massey win." And for  
a moment the awful possibility that they might not  
choked him. His heart was with his paper and his side,  
and he knew that if they lost his heart would be broken.

"They'll win all right," said Valerie hopefully, amused  
to see she was becoming an optimism herself.

They hurried up a narrow stairway lit by smelly kero-

sene lamps hung from big nails on the wall. Three doors opened upon the landing at the top where several men stood smoking. From all about came the low growl of men's voices, and the din of women's pitched high and toned with nervous repression. The large front room, where the two men who worked the lantern were the centre of attention, was filled with friends of Roger and the committee. Through another door Valerie caught a glimpse of a supper table, of baskets and piles of sandwiches, of coffee urns, of cases of bottles, of long rows of cheap tumblers, and of a number of those devoted women satellites who are always ready to get their little thrill on such occasions by being what they call "the faithful few."

The men on the landing swept aside for Valerie and Jimmy who swung open the third door and plunged head first into a little room—the real centre of Dargaville that night.

Sitting at a table facing the door were Bob and Roger Benton, with large blank sheets of paper and a small pile of unimportant messages in front of them. Standing about were Bolton and Allison and other members of the committee, two prominent sheep owners, and several of the biggest Massey supporters from near-by towns. Valerie looked for George Rhodes, and then remembered that he was watchdog for Roger at the registrar's office. So far Mrs. Benton and other women privileged to enter here had not come in. The people now in this inner sanctum were all swayed by anticipative excitement.

Bob seized the batch from Jimmy's hand, instantly perceived the plain envelope, dropped the others and tore it open.

"Here it is," he said, and a dead silence followed.

Jimmy meanwhile, realizing his business, had shot back through the door and closed it behind him.

Everybody watched Bob who jotted down figures and frowned over them. At last he raised his face.

"You lead here by 237, Benton. But the figures represent far more than this town. The beggars have come here from other places to vote. That will throw us out now. We don't know where they have come from. But there it is, a good lead." He handed Roger the paper.

Those present took it in various ways, doubtfully or enthusiastically, as was their disposition, but all agreed it was a good start. Valerie sat down beside Bob and helped him to open and check the other items.

It is the number and the smallness of the returns in country electorates that provide in any closely contested election a few hours' wild fun for the waiting crowds. There may often be no more than a dozen votes recorded in a small booth on a gumfield. These are easily counted, but the result has to be got to a post-office perhaps ten miles away, and the thing to do is to get it there before the congestion starts up on the main lines, because once the big places begin to send out their returns the little ones have to wait. And this waiting throws a number of small but very telling results, that have been counted in the first quarter of an hour, right out of reckoning till two or three in the morning. Roger had the largest and most scattered electorate in the whole country, and the bulk of his figures were to come from little places. And only a dozen of these small counts had managed to get through to Dargaville before the wires began to rush through the leads and prospects of men all over the dominion.

Valerie and Bob opened and counted and checked these, and added them to Roger's local majority. This started him off with a lead of 264, and half the room escorted *the slip* for the lantern into the front and waited to see

the effect on the crowd. Roger moved at once to his wife who stood near the window and whispered the first total into her ear. They gave each other a warm and hopeful look.

The operator received a great deal of attention as he wrote the figures on his slide and slipped it into place. Then from the people outside there went up a heartening roar of approval.

"They're with you, Roger, old man, they're with you," said Allison hoarsely, slapping his chief on the back.

Then back to the little room they all went to await Jimmy's next appearance.

Through the door he came as if shot from a gun, charging Bob with out-thrust hands so that not a fraction of a second be lost, and back through the door he slid with the precision of machinery. Grins of appreciation followed him. More than one of them were to remember Jimmy as one of the spectacles of that night.

Bob and Valerie halved the messages, tossing aside at once those that related to other electorates till they should be done with their own.

"Aratapu," said Valerie, jotting down numbers.

"And Te Koperu," said Bob.

There was a minute heavy with anxiety while they worked. These two places might tell the final tale.

"You lead now by 198." Bob checked again. "Yes, that's right, 198."

The men looked solemnly at each other. Roger had hoped that his two towns would give him a bigger lead than that over Mobray's stronghold, for he was afraid the farmer vote would come nowhere near balancing the labour vote in the bushes and the mills.

Bob and Valerie went on opening the other envelopes. Whatever happened they had to keep their wits clear.



"Massey's in," said Bob.

That caused no excitement. Mr. Massey was always in, as far as his own electorate was concerned, and the putting up of a prohibition candidate against him this time had been a joke.

"Haines leads by a big majority in Whangarei," read Valerie.

"That means he's in," said Roger, wishing it were as sure for himself.

They sent these results to the lantern and listened to the cheers that went up. It was a Massey night sure enough.

Then came Jimmy again through that snapping door.

And a deep gloom settled upon the little room for the first lot of bush returns put Mobray ahead by thirty-six.

"Oh, well," said Roger valiantly, "that's all right. I expected that. I won't carry the bushes. Put it out. We've got to take it."

And it went to the lantern, to be followed by some scattered cheers, but mostly by hisses and groans.

"You've got the crowd here, old man," repeated Allison consolingly.

It was now half-past ten, and the fun was begun in earnest. The next lot of mixed farm and bush votes put Roger ahead by seventeen, and the place rocked with the gambling fever as the men inside juggled with the majorities to make fun for those outside. As the little totals in favour first of one and then of the other seesawed back and forth on the screen the crowd went off its head, drunk not with liquor, for the excitement here kept everyone out of the hotels, but with the frenzy of a big race.

Bob and Valerie were running through a lot of Auckland wires when Mac opened the door. He came in, followed by Doctor Steele and Father Ryan. This was the

first indication that the little priest had voted for him, and Roger was surprised, for Sir Joseph Ward was a Catholic, but church votes, like all others, could not be coerced in any given direction.

"Not too good, eh?" said Mac to Roger.

"It's going to be damned close. The bush settles it now."

"You'll get more of the bush than you think," growled Mac.

"I'm sure I hope so."

Then Bob read out a number of names of Massey men who were safely in, and the possibility, now becoming more likely with every new set of figures, that Massey would come out with a majority, added to the tempest of feeling surging round them. It would be awful to lose here if the party won everywhere else.

"Sloan is leading well for the Bay of Islands," Valerie read from her last envelope.

"Oh, I must get in," groaned Roger.

Valerie was succumbing herself now to the swell of emotion about her. She thought while they waited of Dane, and wondered if he were in bed, if he were asleep, utterly aloof from this madness, utterly indifferent to the result. But she did wish he could have been there to enjoy with her the drama of it, the palpitating entrances and exits of Jimmy bursting with his own grand and glorious feeling as the Mercury of a cataclysmic night.

At half-past two the vibrations in the little room were almost too painful to be borne. There were only six returns to come. At that moment Roger was leading by twenty-one, and of the last places three were country and three were bush.

As for the outside world, it was about certain now that Ward was down and Massey riding to victory.

There was an ominous silence about the counting table, and eyes wandered jumpily watching for Jimmy's next appearance. They all started at sounds beyond the door, and when the boy did appear lungs went flat for want of air. Two of the next three local returns were country and one was bush. They left Roger with a lead of thirty-seven.

Groans went up as they thought they were likely to lose by so little. The last country result was known to be very small, only about a dozen, while the bush was probably a hundred. They could not tell now.

Roger buried his face in his hands.

Bob went on opening the Auckland telegrams.

"By Jove! The Opposition's in! Massey's got a majority of four certain seats, with others leading well!"

"And Haines and Sloan are both in," added Valerie.

Even the personal was forgotten at this great news. His friends said the next day that Roger was sublime in his darkest hour. He forgot that he was about to lose and led the cheers for the new premier. For several minutes the room was in an uproar, and the people outside thought it meant Roger's success and heads were stuck in enquiringly. The excitement spread fast throughout the building. At first men could not believe that the old Liberal Party, with its extraordinary record of twenty-one consecutive years in power, could possibly be down. And when the news was put up on the screen hysterical roars shook the town. There were many in the crowd who cared more for this than for the return even of their local candidate. The picture of Mr. Massey, with the words "premier of New Zealand," scrawled in underneath, was shown again, and it was a matter for astonishment that anyone had voices left to welcome it.

But in the little room the success of the party only

threw into more tragic light the possible failure of poor Roger, who was trembling like a boy.

The minutes dragged by. It was the longest quarter of an hour that any one of them had ever known. The men gathered round Roger felt almost as badly as he did. As for him, if he had been waiting to be shot he could hardly have felt worse. He had talked optimistically but not boastfully throughout the campaign, he had borne a manner considerably chastened by the difficulties in his path, personally he had waged a clean fight, and only he knew how much he hoped to win. As they stood waiting, Mrs. Benton with her lips trembling, moved beside him and put her arm through his.

After an eternity, in which no one could trust his voice to break the strained silence, the door moved and Jimmy shot through it as if he were beginning and not ending his dashes for Bob's hand.

Almost too excited now to see, both Bob and Valerie sorted fast. She was the first to tear open one of the envelopes. It was from the country, and gave Roger a lead of forty-three. But it was Bob they all watched, and he found the last and fateful news at the bottom of his pile. There was a breathless silence, while everyone looked for a change in his expression.

But Bob did not dare to be too hopeful.

"For God's sake," began Bolton.

"Keep calm," replied Bob coolly. "We mustn't have any mistakes on this."

He checked and rechecked. Then he bounded to his feet.

"You're in," he shouted. "It's a majority for you. In by seventy-three. Hurrah! Hurrah!"

And at that moment George Rhodes came through the door with the same official final from the registrar.

Valerie was amazed at the scene that followed. It seemed to her that everyone in that room went suddenly mad, and whether she was too tired or too detached to go mad too she did not know. The committee rushed Roger and wrung his hands, and rushed Mrs. Benton and wrung hers, while she laughed and cried alternately, and they sprang at Bob from all the corners of the room, and then she found herself being seized and whirled about. Men jumped on the chairs and down again and danced on their hats and yelled and cheered as only a crazy lot of Englishmen can cheer. Then Bob calmed himself to write the last screen announcement for the night. He did not trouble to open the other envelopes.

"The labour vote split. The labour vote split. That did it," said Roger, dancing about.

"I thought it would," said Mac, laconically, grinning at him. "I've heard talk of it about the bars for some time. Barrington got them. He knew how to handle them, and they like the way he goes around."

Valerie was near enough to hear this, but she did not take her eyes off Jimmy who to the delight of two farmers was trying to stand on his head on a chair.

Bob led the way to the front room, yelling the news as he went, so that everybody crowded in to congratulate Roger and his wife. They were almost too excited to care about the raucous cheers that the crowd still had energy to give. And there were more than the roars of delight dying and swelling upon the still morning air. There were loud and insistent cries for a speech repeated from group to group. Members of his committee pushed Roger through the window. When the wild ovation had subsided he tried to speak. But he could only blurt out incoherent thanks, a promise to do his best to be worthy of the great honour done him, and a tribute to the decent

campaign run by his opponent. Then calling dramatically for cheers for Mr. Massey, the new government, the King and the Empire, he stumbled back into the arms of his friends.

## V

Valerie now meant to sneak out, but a hint to Mrs. Benton on the subject was received with as much amazed protest as if she had declared her intention to commit murder.

"My dear, you simply must stay to drink his health. And it's champagne, you know."

This was the kind of thing that always made Valerie want to put her thumb to her nose, but she stayed, meaning to slip away after the first toast.

The supper room was soon so crowded that it was impossible to use the chairs set round it. There was standing room only. But the leaders of the campaign grouped themselves about the table. Valerie manœuvred herself into the background, but she was found by George Rhodes, and dragged to the front again. There was much popping of corks amidst hilarity. And then there was a suspenseful pause as the glasses were filled.

But before Bob, who had been deputed to act as an informal toastmaster, could make a start, Roger himself got on to a chair. Excited though he was, he had clear in mind what he wanted to say. The mere waving of his glass provoked an outburst, and when it had subsided a little he began.

"Friends, I want to propose a toast to come before the King and the Empire and the party and all the rest of us. This election has been won for me by the splendid work, the splendid devotion of many people. Comparisons are odious, my friends, but for some time my com-

mittee and I have felt that if we won there was one thing that counted more than anything else, and now that we have won I want that thing to know what we think of it. I'm sure you all know that I mean the work turned out by our little paper, the *Dargaville News*."

He was interrupted by a spontaneous burst of applause while every head turned to look at Valerie. She felt herself getting light-headed and clenched her hands as Roger went on.

"And we know who has done the hardest work, kept the longest hours, and been the inspiration of that office. Our thanks and gratitude to you, Miss Valerie Carr, who ——"

Valerie dropped back amazed, confused, and overwhelmed by the cheer that drowned out the rest of Roger's remarks. In a mist she saw excited friendly arms waving glasses, and excited friendly faces beaming down upon her—Mrs. Benton's struggling to keep back tears, even those of Mrs. Bolton, Mrs. Harris and Mrs. Allison oblivious of the slights of the past, Father Ryan's a warm glow, Mac's a shrewd and guarded grin, Bob's a generous pride, Jimmy's one shining adoration, and the faces of other men she knew and of men she did not know one broad smile of approval. Then somebody cried "Speech," and the word was repeated to the beat of feet and the tapping of sticks. The whole crowd was wound up now and nothing would stop it.

Valerie looked round desperately. Did they expect her to make a speech? She had never made a speech in her life. She felt an awful funk. She did not realize that it did not matter in the least what she said. She found herself being lifted bodily off the ground by George Rhodes, while Bob drew out a chair for her to be set upon. Somehow she got to her feet upon it, while the

room swung round her for a minute, and the cheers and the stamping went on. She ran her hand over her forehead and tried to do something with her paralyzed throat. Her voice was hoarse enough as it was with weeks of proof-reading, and she was afraid she would never be heard even if she could find something to say. Then she grew calm suddenly and raised her hand. And a semblance of silence settled upon the room.

"My dear people," she began informally, "I can't take this for myself ——"

"Speak for yourself. We'll come to the others presently," interrupted Roger, amidst laughter and more applause.

"But I haven't done anything except enjoy it. It was a lot of fun. And I want to tell you it could never have been done without our staff. They did the hard and dirty work without any hope of honour and glory. They have been perfectly fine, never a grumble out of them, I'll take it for them, the men, the women and the boys ——"

She looked down at Jimmy as she said it, and to his embarrassment he got a great cheer all to himself, while Valerie slipped down into her chair, leaving out the thanks she had meant to add. But the audience did not notice the omission as it applauded her again.

Roger was still standing on his chair. "To continue with the *News*. I ask all present to drink to the two gentlemen connected with that paper. I don't have to tell anyone present of the luck we had in getting Mr. Barrington, the most brilliant journalist in the country, to help us out, or of the luck we had in getting a man like Mr. Lorrimer, who after being ill for six weeks could come back and make up for it in three." Roger bowed to Bob and drank.



The toast was drunk with the wildest enthusiasm, for Bob was the most popular man in the place, and at that moment no one grudged the other his share in the glory of the hour. Valerie dare not look at anyone but Bob, for she felt eyes were upon her as well as on him. He got to his feet steadily enough and spoke lightly.

"Mr. Benton and friends. I certainly can't claim anything on the work of the *News*. And as Mr. Barrington does not appear to be present I'm glad to have this chance to pay a tribute to his work on this campaign. He contributed more ideas than all the rest of us put together. I don't think there is any question that his arguments and influence split the labour vote, and he has made our little *News* famous all over the country. And I agree with Miss Carr that the *News* has been a happy family on this job. And I'm sorry I hadn't more to do with it. My part has been a very easy one. There was nothing hard about going round with a candidate whom everybody liked, talking stuff that everybody seemed to believe. But I thank you just the same."

Valerie slipped down again into her chair. It seemed to her there was a deeper note in the applause that greeted these words, but no one, she thought, could have any idea what a triumph of character and decency that little speech was. She felt again that eyes were turned from Bob to her, and then she heard his voice in a different tone roaring out the toast of the evening, "To Roger Benton, the successful candidate, the new member for Waitemata."

In the din that followed, Valerie worked her way from the table.

## CHAPTER XV

### I

ONE fine dawn in the beginning of the following January the *Diana* ran out of the mouth of the Wairoa into the gray flat expanses of the Kaipara Harbour that stretched away in all directions into blurred horizons. Dane sat alone on the stern seat, wearing a light tweed coat over his old navy suit, for though there were already indications that the day would be hot, the night damp still lingered on the river and a chill came off the sea. He was hatless, and the little breeze made by the launch stirred his hair. He looked weary, for he had been up all night, but his skin had a healthy tan upon it, and his eyes had the light of a man bent upon a promising pilgrimage.

He looked away towards the heads where three timber vessels lay, black shapes against the tan cliffs, waiting for the tugs that would take them out over the dangerous bar. In the world of low shores and fleeting fog there was not a sign of another moving thing. As he turned the *Diana* round a sand-bank towards land again, heading for the rather uninteresting shore that lay between the mouths of two rivers, the gorgeous fan of crimson that had formed in the east burst through a bank of low-lying leaden clouds, stretched itself out into boundless space, and lost itself in a diffused glow in the pale luminousness of the clear ether above. Dane looked up at it, enjoying the idea that he had the picture to himself.

He peered ahead into the little cabin where Valerie lay

asleep between two possum rugs, debating as to whether he should wake her to see it. But he decided to let her sleep on. Then he turned the *Diana* into the mouth of the Otamatea River, the Wairoa's neighbouring waterway.

This dawn journey was the beginning of a honeymoon planned since Valerie's recovery from the election. Having given way in the larger issue by consenting to go through the ceremony, Valerie demanded that she have her own way about some things connected with it. She would never have agreed to marry Dane in any ordinary fashion. The affair had to be served up to her as romance and adventure, as far as possible removed from the vulgar eyes of the world and the dull ways of convention. She would have in connection with it none of the trappings of the social world. She had no time to arrange for a trousseau. She refused an engagement ring, and swore she would never wear the wedding badge of servitude. Dane was astonished to find in all this how deeply the wordy paraphernalia of a conventional set had antagonized her, and amused to see, as he continually reminded her, that she gave it a significance it did not deserve. However, he let her talk. Without saying anything about it, he ordered clothes for her from Sydney, for he demanded that love be adorned in fine raiment. And he gave in to her in the end on the matter of having the marriage kept secret as long as she chose. They had had considerable argument about this.

"I wish to go on as I should if we did not have the ceremony, Dane. I want to stay on the paper. I want to go on earning my own living. I can't sit about in your house doing nothing. I should be bored to death in a month. At least that's how I feel now. Of course, in three months' time I may be feeling differently. But now I want the work. I don't want love to become a

habit. It will be so wonderful to come to you for those week-ends."

"Yes, it will. But it won't help to keep the secret."

"Well, let's see how long we can keep it. There's going to be a row, of course. But I've promised you that when the row comes, if it's going to hurt you, I shall tell. I don't care whether dad helped you or not, I don't see what that has to do with us, or our private lives. If he ever presumes to talk morals to us I'll tell him something that will shut him up."

"Sh! You everlasting spitfire! Have it your own way. What I care about is that you love me, and of course you must love me in your own way. But I don't mind telling you I intend to change you a little."

She had looked at him with a smile. "I have a suspicion that you will change me far more than I shall change you. Love has done all it can to you, and I'm just beginning with it. I have no idea what it will do to me."

"I don't think love has done all it can to me," he had replied softly. "There are things about it I have never had, and I'm hoping you can give them to me."

But so far he had not been able to move her out of her determination to go back to her work on the paper. It was not only that she wanted to be occupied, to be getting ahead towards a career, but she wanted to earn her own money. She had never mentioned the subject of finance to Dane. She had not the faintest idea whether he meant to give her an allowance or intermittent presents of cash, and until he did so she would never have brought up the subject. But her economic freedom, the thing for which she had fought and bled, was something she would never give up to anybody.

The lovers had laid elaborate plans to cover their mar-

riage and disappearance. It was quite easy for Dane, whose ties were casual and whose correspondence was irregular. He departed for Auckland in the middle of December, gave the paper for which he wrote his real address in confidence, but told men he chanced to meet that he was heading for the South Island and a summer about the Otago Sounds, gave a Wellington address for his mail, which was to be redirected from there back to the Otamatea, and then he doubled by devious ways back on his tracks to his home, and began a series of night journeys to prepare the camp he had visioned in his mind.

Valerie's intriguing had involved two reliable friends, Viva and Ned Landon, who, as luck would have it, were wandering in the Far North above the Hokianga harbour out of the reach of telegrams and regular mails. She gave out that she was to go with them on a riding and walking tour, and so it was that when Bob saw her off one morning in the direction of Tangiteroria he had no suspicion that she would get no further than the old mission station. He only wondered if Dane too were up in the North somewhere. Valerie had arranged for her mail to go to the Bay of Islands and to be redirected from there to the Otamatea. And she had taken the extra precaution of telling her family that she was too tired to write letters and that they could expect news when they got it.

## II

Dane had at least had his own way about the choice of a spot. Valerie had begged merely that it be somewhere by the sea. And he had chosen a place he had discovered the summer before while cruising about the two beautiful rivers that run with the Wairoa into the Kaipara harbour on the northern side, chosen it not only for

the sake of its own beauty, but because it was within easy reach of the one man he could trust to perform the ceremony and keep it quiet.

"Are you sure of him?" Valerie had asked doubtfully.

"I would trust David Bruce with anything, even as a private person. And as a Justice of the Peace he is like a lawyer or a priest. They call him Strong Box up there because they say he knows some strange secrets, and because nothing you ever put into him comes out till you take it out yourself."

And Valerie was very glad long before December was over that she could leave all the details to Dane and simply be prepared like a child to be surprised and delighted with each day as it came along.

When Dane had gone some three miles up the Otamatea River, between the bare and wind-swept wastes about the harbour, he turned the nose of the *Diana* round a grass-covered headland on his right and let her run on her momentum into a little bay, a perfect arch of white sand, that sloped gently into clear water above a hard sandy bottom, a shore as different as it could be from the steep, soft banks of the muddy Wairoa. On a flat that curved with the bay's sweep were the remains of an old house, long since tumbled into a heap of ruins, and lichen-spotted and overgrown with convolvulus, honeysuckle and degenerated grape-vines. About it, planted as three sides of a square, the open ends reaching to within a yard or two of the beach, were the double lines of poplars which the early settlers in these parts seem to have regarded as some kind of talisman, for they planted them so frequently. Within this square and all about the ruins there flourished an old garden open to the sun and wind. Dane had picked moss roses there the summer before, and had lain down to sleep with the fragrance of sweet briar in his nostrils.

There were hydrangea bushes, mottled out of their original clear blue by the bees, geraniums in wild profusion, and the traces of violets and jonquil leaves turning brown in the coarse grass.

On the edge of all this and a mere jump from the sand Dane had pitched two tents, had made a stone fireplace, and had collected a fine pile of wood. Beyond the camp, near the further end of the bay's curve, was a clump of green bush and fern in a little gully which sheltered the spring that had beguiled the early missionary into settling here. This spring ran into the river on the inside of a rocky point that curved about to make a perfect landing-place and shelter for boats. The *Diana* and the rowing boat Dane had hired could lie there unseen by people passing on the river, and he had been anxious to hide his launch, in which he had run about the rivers a good deal. Beyond the square of poplars, trailing in a straggly fashion up the slope, was a moss-grown orchard of fig and peach and apple trees, stunted now with the swirl of the westerly winds that curled over the bare hilltop behind, but still capable of bearing fruit that was good to the taste.

In spite of its openness to the wind and sky and its position on the river, the place was remote. The nearest habitation was a fish-tinning factory two miles further up, and beyond that were Maori settlements long before one came to those of the whites. The lovers had little to fear from the curiosity of picnickers or fishers, as no one would land in a place where tents showed prior possession. Dane thought he had found the best thing available, and he felt very happy as the sun came up on this delectable abode of little birds and sweet scents. The place was alive with the twittering of sparrows and yellowhammers, and a delicate fragrance from the briars drifted out from the

shore. The river was so still when the launch came to rest that the poplars, caught by the sun, were reflected in the bay.

Throwing off his coat Dane moved along to the cabin, crept in and woke Valerie with kisses on her lips.

She roused herself regretfully out of her heavy sleep. "Oh, did you have to wake me?" she asked pathetically.

"You shall go straight to bed again and sleep all day if you want to. But come on and look."

Weary as she was she knew this incurable romanticist of hers had something to show her, and that if she did not take it properly she would spoil his day. She rubbed her eyes and stretched herself, crawled out and got to her feet. Then she came to full awakeness in a moment. Never had he given her a hint of the tents, which she saw even before she took in the beauty of their setting. She ran her eyes over the whole place before she turned to him.

"You've just got everything I love," she said hoarsely, and sat down on a seat to feast her eyes upon it.

"You really like it?"

"Oh, Dane, how could I help but like it? How do you find such lovely places?"

Pleased he went back to the engine, and ran the launch into the shelter at the end of the bay, where they transferred their things into the rowing boat. Valerie could hardly do her share of helping, so excited was she now with the charm of this retreat, with the prospect of a whole month with him, and when they had finally got all their stuff landed and he took her with the pride of a child to see how he had fixed things up inside she was overcome with delight. She turned with trembling lips and threw her arms about him, and stood close against him very still.



He rubbed his cheek against hers, understanding that she felt something she could not put into words, and then he kissed her face very lightly, and brought her back to a mood that was less intense.

### III

"Valerie, I hope that in your three days' sleep you have at least dreamed of the solemn step we are to take in the morning."

She laughed delightedly.

"You are certainly consistent in your eccentricity," he went on lazily. "I have never heard of a person before who snored away her last days of freedom."

"Oh, Dane, do I really snore?"

"Would it be as serious as all that if you did?"

"Dane, I firmly believe that snores have broken up as many happy homes as any other cause. I simply could not live in a house with a man who snored. If I snore, something has got to be done about it."

"Well, you don't, dear, so the ship won't go to pieces on that rock. But by God! you can sleep. I didn't realize a person of your age could be so tired."

"Poor old dear, it's been awfully dull for you. And you have been a perfect saint. But you won't have to be a disembodied spirit much longer. I shall be rested in a day or two."

"I haven't been suffering, my child. I've had poems piecing themselves together in my head, poems to you and the camp. I've been quite happy."

Dane lounged on a rug and cushions against the stern seat of the launch, his arms clasped above his head, and Valerie sat in one of her favourite attitudes with her chin on her knees beside him. They were in a little creek near

a Maori settlement, where they had come to hear the native band that played on fine nights. They had been still for over an hour listening to it. A moon waxing to the full crept up over tree tops and now shone down upon them.

They had been out on the river only at night so far, not only because it was pleasanter, but because Dane was very anxious not to be seen, and there was more traffic than he had expected. But it had been no hardship to stay in the cool little gully near the tents by day, especially for Valerie, who could hardly stay awake long enough to eat. She had slumped indeed quite badly, and Dane had seen that she must have emotional as well as physical rest, and putting aside his own temporary desires to climb hills or make love to her he had set himself to get her well again.

As she had to be three days in the neighbourhood before the ceremony could be performed, Dane was still teasing her about it. He looked up at her now with a whimsical smile, and reaching up for her hand drew it down against his cheek.

"Need any moral support for to-morrow?" he asked lightly.

Her eyes gleamed down at him. "I wasn't thinking about it," she retorted.

"What then?"

"I was just wondering why people can't keep themselves at a pitch of happiness. Why we can't be like this always, what it is that comes on and changes things. It seems to me that if you and I always had a boat and the moon and a fine night we ought always to feel as happy as we are now."

"But, you blessed idiot, we don't always have the boat and the moon and the fine night."

"I don't see it. I don't understand why we get tired of a fine thing."

"Well, my dear, isn't that the whole damned puzzle? You could not play the Moonlight Sonata over and over again all day long and all night without growing to hate it. You'd fatigue your sense of hearing till it drove you mad. That's what life does to us. We look at the beautiful thing and don't see it any more because we have looked at it too closely or too long. What was once a revelation becomes a commonplace. But what can we do about it? Some of us do try to avert disaster by having all the variety we can in life, by contrasting one thing with another."

She looked away from him for a minute and then she turned and slid down beside him.

"I know something that will never be commonplace," she said softly, looking intently into his face.

"Thank you, dear. That was charmingly said."

"Dane, you're a lovely person. I wish—I hope ——" Her voice broke.

"Taken as meant, dear," he said lightly.

"Oh, I'm so happy, and it seems unnatural, it's just all so beautiful here with you."

"Cheer up, dear. It won't last. It's blowing up for rain, and we shall have to sit in the tents, and cook by the kerosene stove, and it smells horribly."

She laughed. "But you said if it rained we could go fishing out on the flats."

"That's true, we can."

"Well then, that's a poor disaster to threaten me with." She lay happily down beside him and yawned.

"Good Lord. You're going to sleep again," he said. "We'll go home."

But Valerie had almost slept herself out, and when

something startled her in the night, some bird or small animal about the tent, she found herself unable to drop off to sleep again. She lay looking at the pattern of the poplar trees like a fretwork on the moonlit roof. It was so still outside that she could hear fish jumping in the bay and Dane's steady breathing in the cot beside her. She drew herself up and looked across at the black head against the pillow. She was glad to be able to look at him like that in the soft light without his knowing. She wondered as she had done several times how far his looks affected her, for she knew well enough she was crazy about them. She loved to move her fingers about in his hair, to feast her eyes upon the beauty of his straight and sensitive features, and to catch and hold as long as she could the expressions that crept out of his eyes and played about them. She understood well enough why women had gone mad about him. And she was beginning to understand why none of them had stuck to him.

Women did not stick to men they could neither dominate nor understand, she thought, the kind of women he had probably known, that was. She herself was determined not to try to dominate him, even where she thought she might do it, and she knew now that she was probably no nearer understanding him than the others. But at least she meant to try. That he was a creature of strange idealisms, contradictory impulses, desperate despairs, and fierce protests against divisions in himself she knew. She did not suppose she could fight his battles for him, save him from his weaknesses, but at least she was determined now to ignore them as long as possible. She had simply ceased to think of the things that had worried her a few weeks back, the possibility that he took drugs, his lapses into drinking.

As she looked at him he turned a little in his sleep and

threw his arm across his face. It gave him the air of fighting off some invisible enemy. It seemed to her a characteristic attitude. He was so often fighting invisible enemies. And that gave to his eyes the light that she had sometimes seen flash across them, the light of one who has come victorious out of a battle. And she knew that was why his face was so different in expression from that of her father. Her father did not fight.

She grew sentimental about him as she sat there, saw him again as the boy left behind in hotels, lonely and forlorn, trying to puzzle out the strange things that he saw about him, pictured his erratic and undisciplined youth, his sensitiveness and fastidiousness at war with the coarseness and ruthlessness in the world about him, thought over the probability that his early sex experience had been soiled by the selfishness of women older than himself, as she knew his wife had been. Tears came to her eyes as she remembered how life had hurt him. She wanted to get out of her cot then and there and put her arms round him and swear that that was the one thing she would never do. She did not in that moment perceive that it was the one thing she would inevitably do because they loved each other.

#### IV

David Bruce's face lit up when they walked into his office to be married the next morning. Every Justice of the Peace in the North could tell a tale of at least one strange pair who had descended upon him pleading for secrecy. Sometimes he knew the parties, but usually he did not, for they came from other places. But Bruce knew well who were his merry suppliants for silence. He *had not* told Dane, and he did not dream of telling either

of them, that Davenport Carr happened to be his own lawyer, and that he guessed some of the fuss that might follow this marriage. All that concerned him was that they were of age and of sound mind. And as they stood before him, both dressed in white flannels as if they were about to play a game of tennis, he thought he had never seen a more engaging pair of human beings.

Valerie looked up at him and thought at once that since she had to go through with this stupid affair it was nice to have someone with the humorous eyes that Bruce had to manage it. And she was still more attracted to him when he spoke. She felt he was, as Dane had said, a man with a wide knowledge of good and evil, and a mind that nothing could take unawares. He smilingly reassured her as to the secrecy of this objectionable transaction. Nobody ever asked to see the register, he said. He mightn't marry anyone again for six months, as most people preferred the church. It was possible to overlook a record in one quarter and to remember it at a later date. One took risks in the interest of the personal equation. His manager, Bob Hargraves, who would have to witness the ceremony, could be trusted not to tell even his wife.

Immediately after the ceremony Valerie took off the ring that Dane had remembered to buy in Auckland, and as she signed the register she could not resist her little fling.

"To think that this is all that stands between morality and immorality in the eyes of this crazy world, and that I'm supposed to respect the people who believe it is! My God! It's unbelievable. Three minutes' rigmarole to do a thing that it takes courts and lawyers and witnesses weeks of beastly mess and tangle to undo! It's beyond me. And I vowed I'd never go through it." She turned

to Dane almost resentfully. "I hope you're proud of the surrender."

"If I thought it was that I should commence divorce proceedings to-morrow," he retorted. "I could live with anything but a surrender."

David Bruce stood by his window to watch them go along to the *Diana*. He felt he would like to know how they got on.

"How many years do you give those two?" asked Bob, with a grin on his face.

"Bob, I don't think time will matter very much in this case. They care more about the quality of life than the length of it—those two."

There followed wonderful days and wonderful nights for the lovers. For a week the weather was hot and fine, and they began the day with a plunge right out of bed into their little bay. Then after their housekeeping was done he retired into the cooler tent to write, and Valerie either read or walked about the hills or went off rowing to limber up her limbs, stiffened by long months of sitting. If she returned before he was out calling for her she kept very still. After their lunch they played in the bay or dozed in hammocks in the gully till it was time for tea, and then, as the day became cooler and they felt energetic, they would get ready for a night picnic, an excursion up the river, or a long walk over the slopes to the harbour.

At first Dane had insisted on doing most of the work, and she had been convulsed the first time she saw him clean the frying-pan. She tried to see him back in his own setting at the old station, where, except for the care of the *Diana*, he never did a stroke of work. She watched him here doing the washing up, shaking the matting on the ground floor, airing the bedding, as he did in the first days while she was so tired, as if it were some other man

who had taken possession of him. But it was love that had taken possession of him, that had made him more velvety and less nervous than she had ever seen him, and that had made him come alive.

It did rain, and the kerosene stove did smell, but it would have taken more than such material trials to depress them. Nor did they get bored with the living at close quarters, because they knew how to be quiet and how to let each other alone. And because the open air life made them both sleepy it was possible for them, highly strung though they were, to share the same tent at night.

As they packed up Valerie felt the month had been the most beautiful thing she had ever known and because she felt that she was the more enraged at what happened soon after they got back.

## V

About the time the lovers went to the Otamatea there began to leak out in Auckland rumours concerning their friendship. As usual no one knew where the nods and suggestions and shrugs of the shoulders began, whether they arose out of the visits of Dargaville people to relatives in the city or from hints in letters. But by devious ways they got to the Lorrimer family and so to the Carrs. At the first breath Doris Lorrimer had written to Bob for the truth of the matter, and he had replied at once with a loyally positive statement that it was all nonsense, and that he ought to know. But this had no effect on the rumours.

Davenport Carr was worried. He was ready to excuse any wildness, any independence on the part of his daughter except the one unpardonable sin, that of getting mixed up publicly with the wrong man. And from his point of view Dane was the wrong man, much as he admired him.



And like most fathers he made the mistake of thinking that his daughter had never got beyond the age of sixteen. He was annoyed at the rumours for two other reasons—he regarded Dane's association with Valerie as a breach of a code and an act of treachery, and he had recently made the acquaintance of a rich Englishman of family and personality who he thought would make a splendid husband for her. He had not supposed he could choose her husband for her, but he did not believe any woman knew her own mind so well that a little clever manœuvring would not turn her in another direction. And it must be said for him that he had had little demonstration to the contrary.

The last week in January he took his yacht to the Bay of Islands intending to pick up Valerie and the Landons and bring them home by the coast. As luck would have it, the day before the Landons returned from the North Carr ran into the driver who had taken them on the first stage of their wanderings, and learned from him that no Miss Carr had gone with them, nor had she been seen anywhere in the neighbourhood. Then he went to the post-office, where he was well known, and on the plea of urgent necessity to get at his daughter learned the illuminating fact that her mail was being readdressed to the Otamatea. He returned to Auckland that night in a very bad temper, and telegraphed to Bob to find out when Valerie would be back on the paper. Learning that it was only to be a few days he waited. His next source of information was Roger Benton into whom he ran two days later in the club to which they both belonged. They dined together, and Davenport Carr led the talk back to the election, the *News* and the work done by Dane Barrington. A few cleverly worded questions which Roger tried to evade told Carr all he wanted to know.

## VI

As Dane lay reading in his hammock the Wednesday afternoon of the following week his chained dogs set up a fierce growling on the other side of the house, and Lee glided to his side.

"A strange man coming in," he said.

"Well, stop him at once, Lee. Say I'm away. Miss Carr will be here any minute. So get him out somehow. Threaten him with the dogs if he won't go."

He lay on in the hammock for a few minutes, and then exceedingly annoyed he got up to see who it was who had had the cheek to defy the notice at the gate. He walked into the study and was astonished to see Davenport Carr talking angrily to Lee.

The boy had met the stranger near the front steps. He was no respecter of persons where his obedience was concerned.

"Meester Barrington not home. You please to go away," he said.

Davenport Carr looked down coolly enough at him. He had no intention of getting angry with a servant.

"I happen to know he is home. And I'm Miss Carr's father. You go and tell him who it is."

"It no good, Meester Carr. He away." And Lee looked meaningly at the dogs.

That look made Davenport Carr suddenly furious, but he made an effort to control himself.

"It's no use your telling me he's away. And even if he is I'm going to wait till he comes back. You needn't look at those dogs again, you damned little fool."

"You mistake," said Lee, with great dignity. "Meester Barrington away, gone to town."

At that moment Dane came through the front door.

"Thank you, Lee," he said, very quietly, and the boy much relieved, but not at all embarrassed, disappeared inside.

The two men looked at one another for a minute.

"I say, Carr, whatever you may have come to say to me, I'll thank you not to insult my servants." His cool voice still further irritated his visitor.

"Damn it, Barrington, he had the cheek to threaten me with those dogs."

"I told him to, but without knowing who it was who had come past the notice on my gate. I don't allow people in here unless I ask them. But I'm not in hiding, and if you had let me know you were coming I should have come down for you in my launch."

"Oh, you would, would you?" Davenport Carr struggled for control. He knew it was useless to be angry, but something about Dane's manner nettled him, threw him into the wrong mood for this interview.

"Why, certainly. May I ask why you doubt it? And will you please come in."

Carr followed him. He was vaguely aware of the atmosphere of the study he was passing through, and more vividly aware of the peace and comfort of the verandah, the beauty of the shrubs and bush heavy with the sensuousness of the afternoon warmth, the panel of sunny river framed in the leafy ravine, and the curiosity of a fantail that flitted about the verandah posts.

He had an unpleasant feeling even then that he was in the wrong, that he should never have come. The quiet assurance with which Dane indicated a chair was not lost upon him. But he made no move to take it.

"Look here, Barrington, I've come to talk plainly to you."

"I understand that. And since you have chosen to

come to my house I must listen to you now, and I'm ready to hear all you have to say. But will you please remember that it is my house, and that I do not allow any man to come here and behave as he pleases. I insist that you act according to my sense of hospitality or we will go out on the public road. Will you please sit down?"

Davenport Carr had never been spoken to like that in all his life, but angry as he was he recognized Dane's right to deliver that extraordinary speech. He sat down.

Dane got into his hammock and lit a cigarette with a detachment that did not help the temper of the man who was staring at him. The minute he had seen through his study window who his unwelcome guest was he knew he was in for it and set himself to face the music. But he did not mind what he would hear half so much as he did the scene that was likely to ensue when Valerie arrived. But whatever happened he was determined to keep his own temper, to bear in mind the point of view of a father in the matter, and also the point of view of the man brought up as Carr had been.

He was no sooner in his hammock than Lee came through the door with a tray and glasses. Dane could hardly keep from showing his appreciation of the matchless behaviour of his servant, who, gliding like a spirit, placed the things on the red table, moved it near the hammock, and looked at Davenport Carr as if he saw him for the first time.

"What you have, Meester Carr, wine or whisky?" he asked, with his impassive urbanity.

"I—I—nothing. I won't drink." Carr stared furiously past him out into the garden. He felt he was in some conspiracy of management.

"Meester Barrington?"

"Pour out two whiskies, Lee."

Davenport Carr gave one withering look into Dane's insolently quiet face, and then he stared at the fantail that was now perched on a rocking twig of honeysuckle chirping impertinently at him.

When he had poured out the drinks Lee looked uncertainly at Dane.

"What is it?"

"The other?" suggested the boy. "What do I say?"

"Oh, Miss Carr? Is she here?"

"No, but she come soon, you say."

"That's all right, Lee. Let her come here as soon as she arrives."

Davenport Carr tapped his feet nervously on the floor and the minute Lee had disappeared he stood up.

"Look here, Barrington, I didn't mean to lose my temper when I came, and I didn't come here to talk morals to you either, but I'm not going to let you insult me by your manner, especially when you know well enough why I have come."

"I'm sorry I've seemed insulting, Carr. That is the last thing I wish to be under any circumstances, or to anybody. I don't know what kind of manner you expect from me, but I'm not going to get angry just because you do."

Dane did not move his head from his red cushions. Something about his ease and beauty fascinated his visitor even while it enraged him.

"Good God, haven't I a right to be angry? You've got Valerie talked about here and in Auckland. Do you tell me you don't know that?" He took a step nearer the hammock.

Dane's expression did not change. "I didn't know it, and I'm very sorry to hear it. I did my best to avoid it."

"Oh, you did, did you? That at least is something to

your credit. How long have you been living with Valerie?"

"You mean, am I living with Valerie? Well, Carr, I once heard you say that was an unfair and impertinent question outside a court of law, and that it should never in any case be asked of a man, as he had no right to speak for the woman concerned. I agreed with you at the time and I still do."

For a moment Dane thought the other man was going to strike him as he lay, but he kept still, looking him fair in the eyes.

"Barrington, will you get out of that damned thing! I can't talk to you while you lie there like a woman. Get up!"

"Well, if I get out of this thing we'll go out on the road. I repeat this is my house, and you can't dictate to me whether I shall sit or stand. And I always use this hammock when I'm out here. Now will you please say what you came to say. I'm anxious to have it over before Valerie comes, and for God's sake, Carr, be careful what you say to her."

"Be careful what I say to her!" The moment would have been critical for an apoplectic man. "By God, you are a grim humourist!"

"I don't mean to be funny, I assure you. But I repeat it. You know what advice and interference do to her. They seem to give her inflammation of the brain. You see she is not a person moved merely by impulse; she has the fanaticism of strong conviction."

"Oh, the deuce! Anyone can make a conviction out of an impulse."

"I don't doubt that has been your method, my dear Carr, but it is not your daughter's. I know a thoroughbred conviction when I see it and she is full of them. I

should be suspicious of your convictions and even of my own ——”

Davenport Carr swung round on his heel, stamped along the verandah to the steps and down them to relieve his feelings, and then after a minute, he stamped up again.

“Get out of that thing, Barrington,” he shouted.

But Dane turned wearily away from him with a gesture of impatience that showed his visitor what a fool he was making of himself. He dropped down into the nearest chair making a desperate effort at control.

“Won’t you have a whisky, and tell me what it is you wish to say,” said Dane, very quietly.

“I won’t drink—thanks.” Carr sat for some minutes alternately diverted and irritated by the fantail which kept squeaking at him.

“I came to appeal to you, Barrington, if you have a spark of decency left in you. You’ve lived a hot life and you know the world as well as I do. I didn’t come here to blame you for being attracted by Valerie. I wish to be fair. Benton told me he begged you to go on the paper, and I’ve no doubt that she met you half-way. And I could have overlooked—well—some secret meetings with you both thrown together up here. God knows I’ve done things I don’t care to think about. But you should never have got her talked about. That is the thing I can’t forgive. And I liked and trusted you. Now this with my daughter. You should have gone away in the beginning.”

The moderation in this impressed Dane. He had not quite expected it.

“I did, Carr. I did go away.”

“Well, you came back, then.”

“Yes, I came back.” He turned in the hammock and looked out into the garden. The light on his face ar-

rested the other man, but he saw it as something to be taken advantage of.

"Well, if you have any respect for her, Barrington, you must see that whatever there is between you must end at once. I'm here to beg you to end it. You can't pretend that there is anything between you that will last. If I cannot get her to leave Dargaville you must go away yourself, and then what talk there has been will die down. It is the only thing you can do now. Will you do it?"

Dane turned to look at him. "Honestly, Carr, I don't think you have any right to ask me to do that."

"What! Do you mean to tell me you don't know what the result will be to her if you go on?"

"I wasn't thinking of that. I was thinking that she is twenty-six, and a free agent, and that she doesn't care."

Carr felt his anger mounting again.

"Doesn't she? She will care, silly fool. She will care well enough when she comes out of the self-indulgent mess you've got her into."

Try as he would Dane could not keep a shadow of a pitying smile out of his eyes. "Carr, the man was never born who could make your daughter self-indulgent. And love is not the only indulgence. You can be self-indulgent on milk and potatoes if you're made that way. But it is a matter of being born that way. So please don't attribute to me powers over your daughter that I don't possess."

Davenport Carr sprang up again. "Stop your damned philosophizing. It's not helping your case at all. You have behaved like a cad. I can't help saying it. You have seduced an inexperienced girl ——"

"I did not seduce Valerie, and I never seduced any girl."

"You have had her here overnight. What the devil do



you call that? And I believe you have been away with her this last month. It is ridiculous for you to pretend ——”

“I’m not pretending anything, Carr. I tell you frankly I have wished to marry her ever since the beginning of last winter.”

“What!” Valerie’s father lost the little control he now had left. “Of course you did! Your object is plain enough. Of course you’d like to marry her! Of course you’d like to get back so easily after two divorce scandals and the other mess. And a fine husband you would be for my daughter with all that hanging round your neck. By God, marriage is the one thing I will prevent if I can. I tell you that plainly. Damn you! How you can have the infernal cheek—after what I did for you—I’d believe anything after this. And you can get your business out of my hands at once, do you hear? At once. I will not be your lawyer a week longer. If you ruin my daughter, you blackguard —— But you shall not. If you’d ever had the decency to be a parent you’d know how one feels about a child ——”

The torrent stopped abruptly for Valerie swung through the study door with a livid, quivering face, and clapped her hand on her father’s mouth with the suddenness and the appearance of a blow.

“You rotten coward, to taunt a man because he never had a child. Apologize for that at once or I will never speak to you again as long as I live.”

Davenport Carr fell back a step and Dane sprang from the hammock and snatched her riding-whip from her hand.

“For God’s sake, Val!” he exclaimed, horrified.

“Oh, I wasn’t going to hit him. Please get away, Dane. Are you going to apologize?”

“Val, I insist, please. I will not have any scene. It

doesn't matter what your father said to me. Do be reasonable ——"

"Dane, go away. I won't be reasonable. Was he reasonable? I heard what he said to you. He called you a blackguard—you! And that brutal taunt! You damned coward!" She swung round on her startled father like an avenging fury. "You heard what I said. Apologize or I will never speak to you again after this day."

And Davenport Carr saw a terrible look in the eyes of the child that he had come to shelter and defend, and it was a look that took small account of his eminence as a parent, and a look that made his assumptions as protector seem absurd. But in spite of all his confused anger he was big enough to see that he had said an uncalled-for thing.

"I do apologize for that, Barrington," he said unsteadily, dropping back into the chair.

"It's forgotten, sir." Dane turned to Valerie, his eyes trying to hold hers with a compelling look. "Now, Valerie, please say what you have to say quietly. And you know one thing you ought to say."

But it was unfortunate that Valerie had arrived primed as she had not been for years for a row.

## VII

Bob had told her when she returned to the hotel the previous Sunday night that her father had wired to know when she would be back, and then after a little hesitation he had told her also that his sister had written about the rumours.

"Please don't think I'm interfering. But I thought you might prefer to know."

She did prefer to know, and was grateful to Bob and

told him so. She waited to see if she would hear more and did not suppose anything would happen before she saw Dane, as she had arranged, on the Wednesday evening. It was on that day soon after the paper was out that she quite unexpectedly got the news of her father's arrival.

Riding along from Te Koperu Doctor Steele had met the buggy from the stables, had recognized Davenport Carr as the only occupant and had seen that his nod was absent-mindedly returned, and then had begun to wonder what Carr was doing out on that road. With a presentiment that something was in the air he stopped at the *News* office as he occasionally did when passing at that hour of the day to get his paper. He walked in, saw Valerie sitting there with Bob, and after he had been given a copy of the *News* he said casually, "So your father is paying us a visit again, Miss Carr."

He saw her face cloud and Bob look quickly at her. But Valerie didn't pretend she had expected him.

"Why, where did you see him, Doctor? He likes to be surprising."

"I met him on the road here driving out towards Barington's. Perhaps we'll have a game to-night," and he walked out as if he had said nothing significant.

Bob and Valerie gave one look at each other. They had not seen the buggy pass the office, nor had it, for Carr had taken a back cut.

"You'd better go after him, hadn't you?" said Bob quietly.

And without knowing exactly what she feared she had hurried to the hotel where her horse was waiting for her, and caring nothing as to who might have seen her father, she dashed through the town in the heat in pursuit of him. And before she was half-way out she was beside her-

self with rage that he had come up at all to impose the outside world upon their peace. She had heard the voices directly she reached the front steps, and she stole silently into the study. They were not fighting, she was relieved to find, but the things her father was saying boiled the blood already over-heated in her veins.

And Dane saw, as he tried to calm her after her father's apology, that he was wasting his time.

"Dane, I'll say what I want to say and nothing else. My father came here and said what he wanted to say, and now he can listen to me."

He turned away very hurt for here they were quarrelling for the first time. He began to pace back and forth on the verandah, growing more resentful every moment at the scene that followed, though he could not but admit the grim justice of much that Valerie said to her father, and admire the passionate eloquence with which she said it.

She stood against the hammock opposite her father, making at first an effort at control as she wiped her hot face, but after she got started she was like an over-wound spring that had been suddenly released.

"I never heard you talk such rubbish before, and I didn't think anyone could talk such stuff to-day. You mentioned my ruin. Why, Dane couldn't ruin me if he tried. You can't ruin a person who isn't ruinable, who refuses to be ruined. Do you think I'm the Second Mrs. Tanqueray that you come out with that tosh? What about all the women you've been living with? Are they ruined? And me? Am I going to sit round in the dark with the blinds drawn waiting for people to call? Can you see me doing it? How can you be so ridiculous? Nothing can ruin me but my own attitude of mind. Do you hear that? And what do you think I live for? Invitations to

dinner? Are they the cure for ruin? My heavens, I'd call myself ruined if I gave them the importance you do. It's you who are being ruined, not I. When you can take away from me my Beethoven, and the stars and the sunsets and the sea, and my own thoughts and my capacity to love all the things I do love I might agree that I was ruined. And Dane is only making me love all these things the more. For heaven's sake, don't come here and talk such drivel to us."

She paused for breath, and her father, who had forgotten Dane for the present, and was roused to defend himself against her, broke in with fierce irritation.

"You silly fool! Do you think you're the first person to talk this way and to live to find out you're wrong? You're going to lose all your friends——"

"There you go again, insulting good words. Friends! The people I will lose were never friends and I'll be glad to lose them. What earthly use to me at any time are people who don't understand? Don't you suppose I've learned how few friends I have? Will you get it into your head that I don't care a damn about Government House dinners, about meeting people in their cheapest and most stupid moods? You want to frighten me with the ostracism of a set. Why, I ostracized that set years ago myself, and the hardest thing in my life has been to get the damned thing to let go of me. It persists in coming after me. I came here to get away from it and here you come after me slinging it at me again. What in the name of reason it can do to me that I have not done to it I don't know. And you have the cheek to say I'll miss it. If there is one thing on earth I want, it is to miss it, to lose it forever. I wish a tidal wave would come up and sweep it off the face of the earth. Honestly, if you don't want me to go mad, stop talking about it."

Dane turned abruptly a few feet away so that they might not see him smile. As far as he was concerned this was beginning to be funny.

But it was not funny to Davenport Carr, now powerless against her.

"Do you know that the whole place knows you are living with Barrington?"

"It can't know it. But it loves to feed its nasty minds on the idea. It loves to whisper about it and tell tales about it and lick its lips over it. Yes, of course it does. And just because it is like that I despise it, and won't have anything to do with it. But if you want to know, I am living with Dane. There's nothing extraordinary about that, is there?"

Her father half rose out of his chair and fell back again.

"You don't mean to tell me you have come up here to talk to us about morals! Really, my dear father—but your advice is a few years too late. And when I think back over those yachting parties ——"

"Look here, Val, you can leave my morals out of this. I did not come to talk morals to either of you. I came to talk sense. You know as well as I do, unless you're mad, that you can't do what I did or what any man does, and there are things a man can do and things he cannot do ——"

"Oh, yes, I remember. You told Dane he had seduced an inexperienced girl. I thank you for the compliment, but I was not an inexperienced girl."

"What do you mean?" He stared up at her, grasping the arms of his chair.

She went on much more quietly.

"Just what I said. I was not an inexperienced girl, not by a long shot. How anyone could be an experi-

enced girl after the life on that yacht of yours—well—and you were right about my being seduced—I was—but Dane was not the man. It was when I was under twenty, and it was on one of those trips of yours. The atmosphere of your yacht did rather favour seduction, you know, father. And the man was one of the dear, friendly souls prominent to-day in your set. You often have him to dinner, smiling upon mother who would refuse to meet Dane—I say, hadn't you better have a whisky? Sit down. I have a lot more to say ——”

“Who the hell is that man?” Davenport Carr stood shaking with rage in front of her.

“Oh, my heavens! If you men could only see how funny you are about us women! Sit down, and listen to me as Dane listened to you.”

The cold contempt in her tone staggered her father. As if he were in a dream he sat down.

Dane moved up a step or two, as if he would try to stop her. But he saw it was no use. She went on remorselessly.

“I shall not tell you the name of that man. Why should I? I understand mood and impulse now better than I did then. He is a charming man, much older than I. But then, most of them were. You had very clever and persuasive friends, my dear father. I will say that for them. And I was an inexperienced girl, emotional and idealistic and trusting the men you introduced me to. And I was flattered by their attention, and I got a little drunk with it. And I did not see what they were after—all of them. And then one night this man was too much for me, for like a silly kid I thought it was a wonderful thing to have a clever man like that tell me he loved me, and I lost my head, and left the future to him—sit still ——”

“Valerie, I will not sit still! By God, I will not! I

will have the name of that man—we may be asking him to dinner next week.”

“You may, indeed. That would be one of the pleasant little contretemps of your set, one of the reasons why I despise it so heartily, even though I see the humour of it. I’m sorry it’s lost on you.”

Valerie moved to the red table, and took up one of the goblets of whisky. “Here, father!”

But he ignored it, and dropped speechless and shaking back into the chair.

She went on quietly now, and Dane stood leaning against a post listening to her. “Well, it was a tragic experience for me, for the man was such a cur afterwards. He was scared to death, was terrified lest I should tell you. He made it all so ugly. And I had no one to turn to. Can you see me telling mother—or anybody? I had such a helpful lot of relatives! And I knew then what it was to need a friend. I nearly told dear old Marie, but I thought it would worry her so. So I had to puzzle it out alone. Most of us do when we’re struggling kids. And it was awfully hard, because I saw that so many were doing the thing I had done and thought nothing of it, but I knew my one night was all wrong, and it became more and more horrid as I thought about it, and it was awful to have the man so scared and so distrustful. Oh, it made me so sick. And I could feel it all in the air about me when I went on the yacht, but I played the game and went as if nothing had ever happened to me. I had learned my lesson. That would never happen to me again. But I felt it about me and I knew you were in it too. And I began to think about it. I saw that just being sick about it and despising everybody didn’t settle it. I began to read books, and that helped me a lot. I got a different point of view. And I tried to piece you all together again, to be fair to



you. And I tried to see how little you had had at home except a lot of meaningless show, and that it was no wonder you had taken refuge with women who might give you something that looked real. For I came to see that we were all after something that was real, deep down inside us, only it is so hard to know what is, especially when you're young. And then I went after it myself. I needed something to blot out that ugly memory, something that looked beautiful to me. And I thought I was in love, and I lived with another man, before I came up here. I told Dane that. I thought it was the fine thing I wanted. But it didn't turn out right. I wanted it too much as a refuge, I see that now. But it taught me what one must have to be fine in love, and then up here ——"

She paused, seeing Lee give a preliminary peep through the door as if to decide whether it was an appropriate moment to bring out the tea. He came forward, removed the decanter and glasses to a large table, and put the tea tray on the red one, saw that tobacco and matches were where they should be and went out.

His exit was followed by a curious silence. Dane stood where he had been for some minutes, with the fantail, its curiosity about the other man apparently satisfied, now flitting about his head. He looked up at it once and smiled at it. Davenport Carr sat doubled up, his head down on his clenched hands, pulverized into speechlessness. Valerie looked down at him, and her anger now expended, pity began to soften the contemptuous coldness of her face. She moved to the tea-table and sat down and began to pour the tea.

Dane turned, caught her eye, looked meaningly from her to her father and walked off towards the back of the house. Her nerves were still raw enough to be irritated by this hint. But she spoke quietly to her father.

"You'd better have some tea."

He raised his rather distracted face and saw that they were alone.

"Do you think I can drink tea after all you've told me? My God! my game little kid ——"

To her astonishment his shoulders shook, and his head fell again into his hands. As she had never seen him anywhere near the border of tears her first impulse was to put her arms round him. But because she could not tell exactly what was in his mind she did not move.

"For heaven's sake, dad, buck up. I'm all right. I'm not going to have my life spoiled, you know. It was so silly of you to say that. I didn't mean to lose my temper so badly, but you know it does make me so mad to hear all that rot. And then it made me so mad to hear what you said to Dane, as if he were to blame."

He looked up, and seeing her as he thought softened, he leaned towards her.

"Look here, old girl, there was only one reason why I came up here. I did not come to call Barrington names, but I got mad in spite of myself, he was so damned cool. But I came to beg you to stop this. And even after all you've said I still do. The other things are dead and buried. But you'll never bury this."

"And what if I don't, and don't want to?"

"Oh, Dick, old girl, please listen to me. Don't get mad again."

"All right, go on."

"You're infatuated now, Dick. And you can't see the thing in any proportion ——"

"Suppose I married him," she interrupted.

"Oh, that would be madness. It would never last. Nothing ever did with him as far as I can make out. His relations with women are just hopeless. He'd desert you,

or you would have to leave him in a year or two. Anything but that. Get away from it now and it will all blow over. You've got a future, my dear girl. You could marry anybody. I want you to get away from it at once, Dick. I'm going to give you a couple of thousand pounds to go to London, Europe, travel for a year or two, and get over it."

"That's awfully good of you, dad. But you are overlooking something. What am I to do with my moral sense? I've let him care for me, in fact I made him care for me, you know."

The coldness of her tone chilled her father.

"Oh, we all think it's our moral sense. Don't you suppose I know something about human nature?" he said, a little impatiently. "And of course you think his heart will be broken. That's where you women are all so silly. If Barrington told the truth he'd be the first person to be amused at that idea."

"He might be. Indeed, I think he would. But the point of all this is that I care, that I believe he cares. I have to live with that belief for the present at least. What have you to say to that?"

"It's just romantic nonsense. And you'll live to see it."

"It's romantic indeed, dad, but it isn't nonsense. And now that I know what you think about it it amuses me to think that Dane insisted on marrying me a month ago, really out of consideration for you, out of respect for your code—now you needn't look like that——"

"Married! You're married! Why the deuce wasn't I told this before?"

"Goodness me, what difference does it make? Do you forget what you've been saying about it?"

Her father gave her one look, got to his feet, took up

his hat and without another word stumbled off down the steps, and went round the front of the house.

She sat still for a minute and then her lips began to quiver. She bit them into steadiness, and getting up went in to change her clothes, and bathe her hot face. She went back to the verandah dressed in white, feeling shaken now herself by the temper she had been in. Seeing no sign of Dane she whistled for him, and he came from the back of the house.

"Why, where is he?" he asked as he came up the steps.

"He's gone."

"Gone! My dear, you haven't let him go, have you?" He stopped at the top of the steps looking at her.

"Oh, I told him we were married, Dane. And he got up and went without a word. It's the only sensible thing he's done since he came."

A pained look flashed over his eyes. He walked to the tea-table, lifted the lid of the pot, and then rang the bell.

"Make us some fresh tea, would you please, Lee."

Valerie stood still, stung by the fact that he was ignoring her.

Turning at the table he looked at her a little wearily. "Well, old girl, what have you gained by keeping the marriage secret? If you call this kind of thing freedom, I don't."

"I don't care what you call it. He had no business to come and interfere, to call you names——"

"Oh, forget them, please."

"But that wasn't the worst. He came here to bribe me—to bribe me to go away from you. He offered me the thing he knows I've wanted for years—tried my weakest spot—and now—and now——"

He took a step towards her and stopped, drooping his shoulders and putting his head on one side.

"Come here, Valerie," he said in a voice of irresistible appeal. And at the light in his eyes she felt as if she had come out of a long black tunnel into the sweet freshness of a sunlit glade.

She moved slowly to him and all her anger and resentment died down as she felt his arms close about her.

"I want you to promise me something, dear," he said, lifting his lips from hers.

"Oh, anything."

"Don't be reckless."

"Well, what is it?"

"Don't get angry like that again. And don't make a ghost of your father."

"Why, I can't help it. He is a ghost now. He made himself a ghost."

"No, no. Let's start him all over again as something else. I like him, you know."

Her eyes glistened, and she was preparing to throw her arms about him when Lee came through the door with the fresh pot of tea.

## CHAPTER XVI

### I

**A**S far as Dargaville was concerned, Valerie's marriage to Dane did not cause anything like the talk her staying on the paper afterwards aroused. It was strange that certain feminist claims were almost unheard of in the country that boasted the most advanced legislation in the world for women. A married woman who had struck disaster in her husband or in her financial affairs could, of course, earn her own living with the understanding and blessing of the community. But that a bride of established position should wish to do so was carrying the theory of independence a little further than it had so far been carried, even in that land. It could only mean, it was thought, that she was eccentric or unduly desirous of attention. Still, though it talked, Dargaville soon calmed down. It was her relatives who continued to be disgusted and indignant, and the more so as she utterly ignored their letters on the subject.

Dane went to Auckland two weeks after Davenport Carr's visit, and when he returned he waited in the town till Valerie was finished on the paper and took her home with him. He had been away less than a week, but she had missed him, and she was delighted to get away this sizzling February day to the shades of his garden. She could have gone out in his absence, as he had begged her to, but she had not done so. She had walked out to the coast at night instead.

"Did you see dad?" she asked, when they were out in the launch.

"Yes, dear, I went to see him. I told you I was going on business."

"Oh. And what did he say to you?"

"Well, he was rather pathetic, if you want to know. Absurdly hurt that you had not told him before about the marriage."

"What! But he would have opposed it."

"Yes, he would."

"Well, Dane," she stared at him.

"Absurd, I know, dear. But he is not opposing us now. He's beastly humble."

"You've made him so, then."

"No, no. He did some thinking after what you said."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"He wants to get me into his club."

"What!"

"I know, it is funny, isn't it? But I told him I'd never use the damned thing, that I did not want it anyway."

"Oh, I am glad. You never want to go back to that kind of thing, do you?"

"No, dear, I do not." And his tone was emphatic enough to please even her.

That night after dinner as they lay together in the hammock he took a paper out of his pocket and handed it to her. She opened it and stared at it in astonishment. It was a cheque for a thousand pounds. He thought her reception of it was the most extraordinary thing of the kind he had ever seen.

"Why, what is this?" she asked, raising puzzled eyes.

"Have you never seen a cheque before?" he smiled.

"You are giving me this?"

"Well, what is surprising about it, dear? You are my wife, you know, and a man may give money to his wife.

He may even give money to his lover, if you wish us to ignore the ceremony terms in our dealings with each other. I'm not buying you, you ridiculous child. Good Lord! you do carry your theories over the mountains and into the sea, don't you? What is it you suspect me of? For I can see suspicion in your eyes."

"I'm beginning to suspect you of the sinister innocence of the drop of water that wears away the stone," she said, half smiling, half glaring at him.

"The stone doesn't mind."

She had risen, and she now dropped down into his arms.

"I must seem a bit queer, dear. And, please, I think it's lovely of you."

Two weeks later her father sent her five hundred pounds as a peace offering and as a wedding present. The night she received it she sat out late by herself on the balcony. She had now almost two thousand pounds, and one of the reasons for her staying on the *News* had ceased to exist. It was this fact that she sat there considering.

But she had considered other things besides money in her decision to go on with her work. She felt very strongly that love was soonest killed by its own tendency to burn itself up. She had already learned that she and Dane were potently stimulating to each other, and that it would be difficult living together every day to preserve the balance between abandonment and discipline that she desired.

And then she liked the contrast between her week of activity and her week-end of petting and luxurious relaxation. She had a fresh thrill every Saturday afternoon when she met Dane at the launch, and she had another kind of stimulation when she walked into the office on Monday morning.

He had not said one word to shake her decision. But



he thought with a smile of the heat and the flies and the ugliness of Mac's hotel. And he made her week-ends alluring and beautiful.

About the middle of the autumn Valerie asked herself again, as she walked on the coast road one night, if she really did want to go through the winter on the paper. Various influences had been at work upon her in the last month. As a place of residence, Mac's was becoming unbearable, her room more like a box every day, and the dining-room the last word in sordidness. The curtains, always sagging and uneven, had become intolerably so by the number of times noticed. The serrated and ravined cut glass on the sideboard, viewed with indifference for a thousand times, had become painful at one thousand and one. And always as she lay in bed now she could smell the amalgamated pungency of the beer from the front and the stables at the back. Even Bob and Father Ryan had suffered some kind of eclipse, and as table company, had become dull.

And as she walked there drifted through her mind with the force of a warning the lines Dane had humorously quoted to her one night when she had read to him the first letter her mother had written after hearing of the marriage—"Some little talk a while of me and thee There seemed, and then no more of thee and me."

"No more of thee and me." The words repeated themselves over and over in her brain. Then she told herself for the hundredth time that she was thinking only of herself, that she had done nothing but think of herself. And after all her own contract demanded that she think of Dane. She was not keeping her own terms.

He saw two nights later, as she lay with him in the hammock, that she had something on her mind.

When she had smoked half her cigarette she threw it

out into the garden, and wriggled up and looked down at his face below her in the dusk.

"Dane."

"Well?"

"I am getting a bit sick of the paper."

A smile flashed across his eyes. "I've been wondering what you thought you were getting out of it now."

"Well, that's it. I think I've learned all I can from it."

"I should think you had. If you want to do original writing you ought to get at it. You have to practise writing as you do the piano. That ought to give you some idea of what is before you, especially if you want to do a novel."

She looked down at him. She had expected him to ask at once when she would come to live with him.

"Yes, I suppose it isn't as easy as I think it is," she said slowly. Then she looked past his head into the shadows deepening in the garden.

"I've decided this week that I'll go to Sydney for the winter. I want to see about getting my poems published over there. Would you like to come with me?" He said it very lightly, as if he were proposing a walk round the house.

Valerie sat up and stared down into his face.

"You are going to Sydney—in any case?"

"Why certainly. I want to arrange about getting some more work in Australian papers."

She continued to stare at him.

"What's the trouble, Miss Freedom?"

"You would go away?"

"On business, dear. I have to. And I'm asking you to come. Of course, you're a free agent——"

Her hand smothered the rest, and half fiercely, half

caressingly she seized his head and beat it against the cushions.

She gave Bob a month's notice the next day.

## II

At the end of June they slipped away to Sydney, passing through Auckland without seeing anyone but Valerie's father, and they returned at the end of August in the same secretive manner.

Valerie was delighted with Sydney, delighted with Dane's friends, and meeting for the first time in her life a friendly community of artists, found it the thing she had dreamed about, the world in which she wanted to shine. But there was a fly in the honey. The dining and wining were not good for Dane. And there were two occasions on which he disappeared for the best part of three days.

So that by the time they returned to settle down to life together at the old mission house she knew well he had chosen the better half of wisdom when he had left the life of cities behind him. And she was by no means sorry herself to have the prospect of work and peace ahead of her there for a while. She was content to leave a remoter future to take care of itself.

They had discussed on the voyage home what they would do to the house to make it a proper custodian of the rights of two such individualistic beings as they were. The first thing they agreed on was that unless one of them felt an overwhelming urge, which was not to be encouraged, they should not meet till lunch time. Dane did a good deal of his work at night and often slept late. Valerie was very anxious that his ways should not be interfered with, and he was as anxious as she that parts of his

house should be private, that he should be able to be alone when he wished, and particularly that he should be able to keep his moods from her as much as possible.

The changes were inexpensively made. Across the hall from the study were two rooms, one of which had been occupied by Dane as an indoor bedroom and the other by the boys. This space was now given over to Valerie, and an extension was added at the rear of the house giving the boys a large and sunny room off the kitchen, and Dane himself a bedroom and a small study where he could write at night when Valerie wished to play the piano. This latter room opened directly into his den. This arrangement put Valerie on one side of the hall and him on the other, with common ground in the front study, and in the bathroom which was on her side next the kitchen. It was understood they would not invade each other's privacy without invitation.

Valerie had her section of the verandah, too, that outside her own rooms, fitted up with a sleeping-cot and a table and chairs.

As there was no dining-room, lunch, always a tray affair, was to be served as he or she might fancy. The location of dinner had the same pleasant uncertainty. In some moods Dane liked it served ceremoniously in his den, in others he liked it in the study. More often, and when it was fine, he liked it out-of-doors.

She had seen at once that she must take no part in the running of the house. Beyond making her own bed, dusting her own things, keeping her own writing-table tidy, and arranging with the boys to take her laundry in and out of Dargaville, there was nothing for her to do. It seemed that never in her wildest dreams could she have hoped for a more harmonious atmosphere in which to try to write.

Dane told himself he had never been happier in his life. He did not know what she did to him, but with her he was less disturbed with the sense of his own futility, and better able to work than he had been for some time. And now, too, he had a real need to work. It had cut a little into his income to give Valerie the money and the holiday, and to make the changes to the house. And though his poems had been published in a blaze of publicity and were selling well as things went there, he saw he must keep up a certain output if he was to give his wife things he now wished to give her. He had got along very comfortably before without doing much. He had set aside a sum he would never under any circumstances cut down to leave to his boys and to see them back to China, in the event of anything happening to himself. That was in the hands of Davenport Carr as a trust. He now wished to get ahead of his expenses and provide something for Valerie. This was a stimulus that did him good, reinforced his rather feeble sense of being of some use in the world.

### III

"Now aren't you glad I stuck out and refused to go?"

"Oh yes, I really am, dear. I loathe Christmas parties as much as you do. But I think you might have tempered the refusal with a little—well"—Dane waved his hands expressively,—“been a little more delicate——”

"My dear boy, relatives don't understand delicacy. The only thing that will make a dent in their egotism is a brick. Even then their eclipse is only temporary. If there is a more vital thing on earth than the egotism of a relative I'd like to meet it. I assure you the minute I show signs of delicacy they think I'm weakening, or re-

forming, or learning to appreciate the wisdom of their ways, and then they begin to wheedle and bribe."

"Well, I must admit that when I hear you talk I feel I ought to be glad I never had any." He looked up from the hammock at a crack in the verandah roof where a frail twig of honeysuckle had defied the opposition of shingles and was wriggling through.

Valerie, who was sitting in a chair beside him, took one of his hands and laid it against her cheek.

"You had two very effective ones, old dear, and they got a wonderful inspiration in a certain hour thirty-eight years ago."

His eyes glowed over the edge of the hammock at her.

"You know, you're going to spoil me."

"Oh no, you'd nothing to do with this. They did it, and then they had the sense to die and leave you free."

He smiled whimsically at her. "Ah, I sometimes wonder how free they left me. That is the funny part of it. I'm not nearly so free as you are, after all. Just see how powerless I have been against your father. In spite of all I could say he elects me to his club with a flourish, pays my dues, insists on my dining there in full view of Auckland's greatest, and hey presto! I'm back in society and may be invited to a Christmas dinner. Ye gods and little fishes!"

"Well, he felt he had to do something for you after the way he behaved."

"That's not the point. The point is I could not resist him, and yet they cannot move you one inch."

"They would move me fast enough if they had one honest decent emotion about us, if they had anything in their minds but their beastly curiosity and their condescension. I can see them sitting round discussing us with an awful solemnity. Mother would gather them together,

and they would go into the problem as to which of the heads would be implicated in dinner invitations, as to which of them would give us a lunch or a tea, as to how much further they would have to go, as to whether the younger children should be allowed a glimpse of the star sinner of the day, and so on. You see I've heard it all before. Not a single spontaneous feeling about us, just a calculating fitting of us in to their scheme of things, and underneath the rules and regulations the women would want to see us, because they want to feed their nasty dribbling sensations on what they think marriage to you has done to me and on what they think being a sinner has done to you. Those aunts of mine are like radium, they bore into your insides looking for things, and they just gloat on brides and bridegrooms—what's the matter? Am I talking too much?"

"Well, honestly, dear, though you are very eloquent about your relatives, I am a bit sick of them. Since you have turned them all into ghosts why not let them be peacefully laid?"

"But they won't behave like proper ghosts. You see how they appear at our elbows every now and then and wave a skinny hand." She smiled over the edge of the hammock at him.

"Oh Val, delicious Val. You ought to be on the stage. Come in here, I want to kiss you."

"I don't want to be kissed. I want to play Chopin."

"You'll play all the better if I kiss you first."

She laughed and clambered in to him.

After a while she started up. "Oh, I forgot to give something to Michael," she said regretfully.

"Oh, did you? Well, I gave him a sovereign, so that will do for both of us. But I thought you didn't believe in Christmas."

"Well, now, Dane, I do have some sentiment."

"I should think you had. There are times when you are sticky with it."

"All right, beast. I won't kiss you for a week." She wriggled out of the hammock, pretending to be mightily offended, and stood frowning at him. She was piqued that he had made no move to hold her back. He merely smiled mockingly up at her.

"I suppose you think you could keep that resolution," he said, his eyes on hers.

"I could." She glared back defiantly.

"Well, it would be a pyrrhic victory if ever there was one," he smiled.

She rudely poked out her tongue at him, and walked to the verandah steps, and looked out into the garden.

He looked at her for a few minutes as she stood profiled against a mass of honeysuckle, then he reached for his pipe and tobacco and began to smoke.

It was a clear evening, with the promise of fine weather for Christmas and Boxing days. The first stars projected their feeble light through the last reflection of a very red sunset. Now and again the sharp cry of a weka in the bush behind or the call of a morepork in the pines cut the air. A few crickets already reminded an optimistic world that this summer would go the way of all others as they sang of the falling of the leaves and the coming of the deadly winds.

Valerie turned from the steps, walked back to the hammock, leaned down over Dane and kissed his hair. Then she went off through the door into the study.

After a short silence the opening bars of one of his favourite Preludes floated out to Dane. He put down his pipe, settled back in his cushions, and threw his arm across his face with a feeling of great content. It was a perfect *Christmas Eve*.



## IV

One close night the following February Valerie rose from the piano a little worn out. But it had relieved her enormously to crash through the Appassionata and the Pathétique and two of Rachmaninof's Preludes. She had played them in a tense and rageful manner, and the sounds had swelled about the house and echoed about the garden.

She walked out to the verandah expecting to see Dane in the hammock where she had left him earlier in the evening. But he was not there. She glanced into his den, to which all three doors were wide open. He was not there either. She sat down and lit a cigarette waiting for him to appear. But he did not appear. She wondered if he had gone into his back room to write. She got up and stole softly along the path, but there was no glow or sign of light there. Then she began to wonder if he had gone off to Mac's while she was playing, gone off to escape from the mood that had overwhelmed him all day.

It was a mood that had shaken her and the whole country. The news of the discovery of the death of Captain Scott and his companions on their return from the South Pole had reached New Zealand two days before, and that afternoon Dane had gone into Dargaville for the Auckland papers and the latest telegrams on the subject, and since his return both he and she had been speechless.

Valerie had shut herself in her room with one paper, and when she appeared for dinner her eyes were a little red. Neither she nor Dane were able to more than pick at their food. They did not attempt to talk about the tragedy. It depressed Dane terribly. He had been nervous and irritable for a week, not irritable at Valerie, that he never was. She could have borne it better if he had been, for *then* she could have snapped back at him. But as there

was nothing personal in such moods there was nothing she could do but ignore them.

This was the first bad one he had had since they had been in Sydney. Up till then he had been so much better that she had even begun to hope that love would get the best of the weaknesses that had, she thought, been encouraged a good deal by loneliness. When she had seen him growing listless and eating less a week before, she had suggested he go down to the coast, as he had done when alone, but when he saw she did not want to go with the cottagers there he did not want to either. He was becoming more and more dependent on her for company. Even when he did not want to talk he liked to know she was near him.

She walked round the house and about the garden. She did not like to call for him, knowing that when he wanted her he would come for her himself. But she would have liked to have known he was there, and that he had not gone to Mac's.

Then she told herself she was silly to anticipate. That was what so many women did. She began to think again of the end of Captain Scott and his gallant little band. What a story! She sat abashed and shaken before it. It seemed to her the most wonderful thing in the world that men could face death and make of it what those men made of it. Surely when men could die like that there was something beyond. Unconsciously her mind began to work on it, and she wondered if she could write what she felt about it. Dane had been wired to from three papers for an article. Perhaps he had gone off to think about that, and it would be fine, she thought, if she could do anything that was good enough for publication. After walking about for a while she went inside, and seeing the supper tray with wine and cold food that was usually left

in the study she found she was hungry. She ate some cold chicken and drank some wine. Then she went into her front room and sat down at her writing-table.

But she could not think of anything to say now. She stared at the beautiful Norman Lindsay drawing of Dane's head that he had given her for his Christmas present, and it seemed to her that she had never before noticed how well the artist had reproduced the sensitiveness of that disturbing face. And she began to think that though she had lived with him for over a year, and loved him more it seemed to her every month, she understood him no better than she had done in the first week. It was strange to love a thing one could not understand.

She deliberately turned away from it trying to forget it, looked round her attractive study, and had a momentary delight in the peace she had in it. Her rooms were small and furnished plainly enough, except for the rugs and hangings that Dane insisted she have to provide warmth and colour. With the exception of her piano, she had brought up her own things from Auckland, and her own books and some of her own pictures were there against the tinted walls. But she had been amused to discover the changes that had come over her taste. No longer did her prints of popular Academy pictures please her. The Laughing Cavalier and her Watts and Rossetti things were stuck away in a drawer. Her bits of Crown Derby and Doulton looked merely pretty and feeble beside Dane's porcelain and jade and ivory and enamel. So her rooms were bare of ornament, and she preferred to keep them so. She had plain and comfortable modern furniture that fitted well enough in the available space.

She had settled down to work here now, though so far she was struggling with large expanses of words which she had been unable to reduce to the form and shape that she

felt they must have. She had been encouraged by Dane's assurance that this was nothing to be alarmed at, that she might go on for some time before she achieved a sense for technique.

But it annoyed her this night that she could not manage words well enough to put down what was simmering in her mind about the South Pole explorers. Her mood was too emotional. She took up a newspaper and tried to read the story calmly, to view it in a detached manner. But it was too much for her. She began to cry again, and gave way unreservedly. But she knew that she was not crying solely because a few men had died heroically away down there in the snow.

As she sat still at last, feeling very lonely and sorry for herself, she heard the launch come into the bay below; she sat up listening, and because she had assumptions in her mind she thought she heard Dane stumble on the track through the trees.

With a quick movement she put out her lamp. Then she hurried into her bedroom and began to undress in the dark. She did not want him to see that she was still up, as if she had been waiting to see what time he came home. And above all things she did not want him to come to her the worse for drink. He had never done so, but she had the persistent fear that he might.

Dane saw her light as he came from the top of the steps, and he stood to wonder why it had so suddenly gone out. He knew it was after one o'clock. Had she been working, or was she anxious about him?

He knew he had been very depressed and disagreeable for days, but it had relieved him enormously to see that apparently she was not worried by it. She was wonderful, he thought. She did not fuss, and yet he felt her as a warm and understanding person. It would have driven

him mad to think she was worrying about him. What earthly use was it to worry about another's moods?

And now after racing recklessly about on the river he had conquered his mood. He had been more shaken by the story of those deaths in the snow than he had been about anything for years. What it had done to him he did not know, but it had given him a kind of melancholy exaltation, had put vivid pictures into his mind and a curious peace into his soul. And he had come back unable to think about it any more for the present.

As he stood there he began to think of Valerie as a warmth to blot out now the trouble of his recent days. He felt suddenly lonely for her. He had expected to find she had gone to bed, in which case he would not have disturbed her, but now that he had seen her light he wanted to feel her arms about him. He walked on past the front of the house and saw that her rooms were in darkness. But he knew she could not yet be asleep.

He stepped up to the verandah, raised the screen, and saw she was not in her cot.

"Valerie, where are you?" he called a little urgently.

"I'm undressing, here," she answered from within. Her voice sounded ragged.

He vaulted over the railing, pushing back the light screen, and went to her window.

"Come here, dear. Why are you in the dark?"

Then she knew her assumptions had been wrong, and she was afraid he would suspect she had been worrying about him. She could not make her mood light all in a moment.

"Come here, Val," he repeated. It was a tone that always gave her a little thrill.

She went to him as she was in her white lingerie, and he put his arms round her as he sat on the window ledge.

"Why have you been crying, old girl?" he asked softly, gripping one of her bare shoulders.

"I can't help it—those men ——"

He did not believe that was the whole truth, but he was comforted by her good intention. And it was much easier to believe her than to question her. And there are moods when half truths do not trouble one very much. He began to kiss her hair.

"I know, dear. But don't let's think about it any more. It's made me feel awfully lonely."

"And me too," she said settling against him.

## CHAPTER XVII

### I

“**W**HERE you like your lunch, Meesis Barrington? Meester Barrington not very well. He stay alone.”

Valerie turned in her chair, her expression as impassive as Lee's. “It's rather cold outside, isn't it?”

“Yes. It windy too. There is a fire in the study, Meesis Barrington.”

“Then I'll have it there, thank you.”

She put down her pencil, and after he had gone she sat staring at nothing in particular. Then she shook together the sheets of paper scrawled in her flowing hand that littered the table in front of her. She got up and went to the bathroom to wash her hands. When she entered the study she saw at once there was no sign that Dane had been working there that morning, as he usually did when he wrote at that time of the day. A fine fire crackled its preliminary way to a solid blaze.

The restrained beauty of the room affected Valerie every time she entered it, but her pleasure in it was a little clouded now by a pang of loneliness. She was always ready to meet Dane by lunch time. She liked to have his suggestions and criticisms on what she had been trying to do in the morning. His interest and encouragement were a fine stimulus to her uncertainty. And she had lately been very pleased with herself because an Australian magazine had accepted her humorous article on the evolution of personal taste. Dane had liked it too,

and had given her an idea for another in the same tone. It was this she had been working on this day. So she missed him all the more.

But she sat down determined to eat, and to shut off disturbing thoughts. However, something about the situation hurt her. Once before that autumn he had been away from her for a couple of days. She had not known then, any more than she did now, whether he was at home or at Mac's. She had taken the information as Lee had given it to her, and without asking any question, had waited for Dane to reappear. But she had found that her love was being denied something it desired, that if he were ill she wanted to take care of him, and yet she did not want to see him ill. She would have shrunk from him unshaved, been shocked by any demoralization of his looks, that was one of the penalties of her passion for his beauty, but at the same time she could not bear to think that she was not equal to that test.

And she knew, also, that he detested being fussed over. When she had spoken that autumn of his loss of appetite he had irritably begged her to ignore it as nothing unusual. Like all sensitive people he hated to think he was under any kind of inspection, and hating it as much as he did, she had been very careful not to make the same kind of observation again. She was more than ever determined to help him by being happy in herself.

And so she ate a good lunch, and then changed her clothes and went out to prepare a bed for winter bulbs. She had renewed a childhood passion that year, and all the past summer and autumn there had been gorgeous patches of colour in the sunshiny spaces of the garden. After two hours she put away her tools, and sat on the front verandah to smoke a cigarette and to relax. She did hope Lee would come to tell her that Dane wanted her.



to have tea with him. But no, he brought a fully equipped tray for one out to her.

As it depressed her to take it alone she did the most sensible thing she could afterwards. She got up her horse and went off riding in the direction of Te Koperu, turning up a track on the ranges to get a fine view. There was a fresh, cool wind that stimulated her, and she was sufficiently philosophical when she reached home to face the rest of the day with her own company. She played to herself all the evening. She was now working through the piano scores of the Beethoven symphonies, so that she would the more enjoy them when she came to hear them played by the great orchestras of the world. They were an endless source of delight to her, and this night she lost herself in the art she loved, and forgot all about Dane until Lee brought in the supper tray.

## II

Dane had waked late that morning from an intermittent dozing to find himself in a wretched state of nerves. He had been sleeping badly for a week or two, and had fought every night the temptation to take morphia. He wondered why some men were born to sleep so well and others so ill. He had seen bushmen sound asleep on the tops of logs that were being drawn along tramways by patient, reliable horses that needed no guidance, he had seen men asleep on wagon loads of hay, men asleep about the decks of timber ships, men asleep in the fields, men asleep on timber stacks in the dinner hour at the mills, men asleep on chairs and on benches in the pubs. And it seemed to him as if he were the only person he knew to whom the dark goddess denied that elementary right of man.

He wondered sometimes if his erratic, ill-regulated

childhood was the cause. Whatever it was, his terrible awakeness was the curse of his life. He had done what he could in recent years. He had lived more and more in the open air, and that had helped a good deal. And marriage with Valerie had helped him. He had been better in the first year than he had been for a decade. But this autumn the shadow had fallen on him again, and he had as well the fits of indigestion and nausea and depression that he was beginning to dread.

Even the strong coffee that he took did little to buck him up this day. He paced the garden on his side of the house for an hour and found himself exhausted. He went into his den and drank a stiff whisky and lay down on his lounge, hoping the warmth of the room would help him to doze the morning and the mood away. But it was no use. When he got up the bones in his body seemed to dance under his skin like the ridiculous antics of marionettes moved by the jerks of a capricious string. His nerves were driving him mad.

He forced himself to eat a little of the chicken jelly Lee brought him for lunch. He asked about Valerie, and was glad to hear she had gone out to garden. He went out to his verandah and tried to get some distraction from the whistling of the wind in the trees and the scurrying of the leaves about the paths. But he was beyond the stage when nature was any use to him. He went into his back room, and from the window caught a glimpse of Valerie wheeling a barrow of manure to her flower-beds. He heard her whistling. It did not hurt him that she could be happy without him. It was the one thing that helped him to bear himself, when he did bear himself. As he looked at her then he was hardly conscious of her as a woman he loved; he was so weary and so hounded by some insatiable demon within. When he heard she had gone off

riding, he went down to his launch and turned up the river, as he had done before when he was away from her. At least it would not be at Mac's, and under the eye of Bob Lorrimer, that he went under.

### III

In spite of her determination to be detached, Valerie felt a chill when Lee came to ask her at lunch the next day where she would have it.

She knew she would learn nothing if she asked that boy questions. She was both irritated by having him as a buffer between her and Dane and attracted by his admirable matter-of-fact air. As she ate again by herself the situation began to get on her nerves.

As before she went out to soothe herself by working with the earth, and as she dug she heard the launch come into the bay. She slipped back quietly to her rooms and was in time to see Dane emerge from the trees and disappear on his own side of the house. He slouched along with a stoop like an old man. She had not been able to see his face. She sat down so overwhelmed with pity for him that hot tears oozed painfully out of her eyes and dropped upon her grubby hands. But she tried to comfort herself with the thought that perhaps men did not suffer nearly as much about this kind of thing as women did for them. Perhaps he felt much better now that he had fed that demon in him. He would be weak and sick for a day or two, but his mind might be at rest. She knew well enough he drank for no mere self-indulgent reason. Whatever it was, it was not that. There was a continual fight going on there, and it was knowledge of that that saved him from her condemnation.

She decided to ride into Dargaville, so that if he had

been at Mac's the night before, as she supposed, the town should know she was not crushed by the fact. She stopped as she usually did at the *News* office, and learned that Dane had not called for the paper. She stopped at the post-office and found he had not got the mail.

When she got home she took the papers and the mail into her room with her. There were several letters for Dane. She separated them, thinking that having this excuse she would go to his verandah, and that if he were not there she would call him. She felt it ridiculous that she could not make a move towards him. But even as she thought it, Lee knocked on her door.

"You have the mail, Meesis Barrington?" he asked.

She gave him the papers and the letters for Dane.

But something about this incident annoyed her extremely. And it was humiliating to be cut off from the man she loved by this boy. And yet, if the man she loved preferred it this way, she had to abide by his wish.

She ate her dinner alone again that night, and became so restless and upset by her isolation that she was in no mood to play the piano afterwards. She went out into the dark and began to pace the drive between the house and the gate. The quality of the night did not help her. There was still a wind, but it was not the fresh wind of the west with a tonic in its rushing air. It was a brooding northeaster of the three-day kind, swaying the pines to a melancholy whine and the poplars to a metallic hiss. It was a wind that preceded a storm of rain. It was a wind that hinted at pain and trouble and unutterable sadnesses. It was a wind that glued one to the earth, that put weights in one's boots and turned one's muscles to lead.

At last she felt she was tired enough to sleep. She found her supper in the study. She was able to drink a glass of wine and eat some crackers, but she felt so lonely

when she got to bed that it was a long time before she fell into an uneasy dream.

"Come in," she said at one o'clock the next day, as she heard the knock.

She had expected Lee, but it was Dane who walked in, closing the door behind him. He looked pale and tired, and there were circles round his eyes, but he was not frantic any more. He seemed relaxed and a little drowsy. There was a delicate scent about his fresh white shirt, and he was wearing the navy suit and the blue tie she liked best. His obvious attention to her likes touched her.

Afraid though he was of her judgment, he stumbled in to her like a child, with an appeal radiating from his whole expressive body. But he had no need to fear her. Her eyes flashed when she saw who it was. She sprang to her feet with her arms out, as if he had returned unexpectedly from a journey, and before he could speak he felt her kisses upon his lips and her hands caressing his head.

"I've been a beast to leave you alone, dear," he said hoarsely, when he could find his voice.

"Oh, don't, please. I understand."

"I'm better alone."

"Yes, yes, I know. Don't think about it. Kiss me."

He thought it wonderful that she could blot it out like that. But she was only too glad to blot it out, only too glad to have him restored to some measure of peace with himself.

It was the storm that broke upon the place that night, lasting for three days, that brought them to talk of going away. He did not particularly want to go. Changes in food upset him and he could not work so well, but he saw Valerie thought a change would do him good, and he thought she wanted it for herself. Each was thinking of the other and thinking wrong, as is the strange way of so

many people who care. So they went to Rotorua for a month. And on the whole it did Dane a lot of good. The fine winter climate of the Dominion's most famous resort helped him to eat, and the mineral baths and electric treatment he took restored his nerves. They spent most of the time walking and driving about the hills and launching about the lakes, and Valerie was rejoiced to see how much better he seemed when they returned home.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### I

ONE warm night in the following February Valerie lounged on Dane's verandah, as near as she could to the edge without letting the chair topple over. Such little coolness as there was on the river came up through the clearing to be dissipated by the lingering warmth and heavy scents of the garden.

A half-finished cigarette disintegrated into ash in a copper tray beside her. She had put it down when Dane had begun to sing *L'heure Exquise*. She always forgot that there could be any other kind of hour when he sang to her. He had not a strong voice, but it had a quality that filled her with a tingling delight. She forgot now her hours of anxiety about him in the last months, her increasing sense of some invisible disrupting influence that was coming up between them. But they still loved each other after two years, loved each other beyond any doubt, she told herself.

Valerie had changed in those two years. Her manner had softened. Her voice was fuller and lower. She was less positive in expression, more sympathetic in judgment. Physically she was more alive than she had ever been. Her maiden leanness had disappeared, and her shapely limbs were rounded to alluring curves. And about her there was always the glow of splendid health. It was this that made it hard for her to realize at times what it could mean to lack vitality.

But as Dane sang she was not thinking of his health,

she was not looking into any doubtful future. She was lost in a subjective sweetness, conscious only of the flute-like notes that floated out to her. She felt a jar when they stopped.

He came out through the study door looking for her. He leaned over the back of her chair, putting his face against her hair, and one hand under her chin.

"I'm not in much of a mood to sing, dear, I feel lazy."

He moved round her chair and dropped into his hammock with the motions of a man who is tired.

One of the boys came into the den and lit two of the lamps, and by the streamer of light that fell across Dane's face Valerie saw with a little pang that there were heavy circles under his eyes. She could never bear to think of anything but beauty on his face. She wondered at times how far she was hypnotized by it, how far she loved the man behind that face. Of course there were definite qualities there that she could name as lovable, his appealing affectionateness, his whimsical sense of humour, his softness, his uncanny understanding, his personal charm, but behind all these was that baffling man she did not know, the man she could not help. She had speculated a good deal about his duality, the spartan mind in the hedonist body, as she put it to herself, and she wondered if the fight was between those two, if it were as simple as that. She knew now there was a deadly battle going on behind those eyes, but she could not tell what the opponents were, what armour they wore, what gods they fought for. But she could see the smoke of it, like a person watching from a far-off hill.

As she looked at him she was afraid that the trip they had taken that summer, a wandering trip about the North, had not toned him up as she had hoped it might.

The warm weather lasted for two more days before it



broke with a thunderstorm that left the air fresh. The change seemed to make a difference to Dane. He recovered some of the fire he had lately lost. As Valerie sat with him after dinner, and saw the good mood he was in, she ventured to make an observation that she had wanted to make for some time.

"Dane, I do wish you would do something about your indigestion. You are better to-day, but you have been getting worse for months. You know diet can do wonders for that. Now don't frown, dear. You men are all so deplorably careless about your health, and you know I happen to care a lot about yours."

"I've always had a weak stomach, Valerie. I can't do anything about the damned thing. Please don't worry about it. It's really going away that upsets me—this last trip—we had such a lot of greasy stuff."

"Well, then, we mustn't go to the wilds again."

"Oh, please, dear, don't bother about it. I'm all right."

She saw that her reference to it had chilled and irritated him. To make amends, she moved her chair beside the hammock, and took one of his hands and kissed it and rubbed it against her cheek. They smoked and sat still for a while, and then, seeing that he was aloof in mood from her, she began deliberately to try to bring him back to her again, to put him in the mood when he could forget everything but her.

He felt her vitality about him like a glow in the night. There had never yet been a time when she could not stimulate him, but to-night he felt as if the springs of his forces had run dry. There was a fierce inhibition somewhere.

Valerie got up abruptly, walked to the steps, and looked up at the velvety sky where the Milky Way was like a trail of quicksilver pulverized to luminous dust. She stood still

there for a few minutes, and then she went in and began to play.

He was lying with his arm across his face when she came after an hour to the study door.

"I'm going to have some supper. Do you want any?"

"No, thanks. I'll stay here for a while longer."

Chilled by his manner she went back and ate alone, and then restless and unhappy she went out to walk on the other side of the house.

Something in the mysterious depths of the range stretching up to the stars, in its potent silence, the weight of life it carried so secretively, stirred her out of her little petty mood, calmed her senses. She told herself it was absurd to put the significance she had been doing on Dane's manner. He could not always be responsive, but it was the fact that this was the first time he had not been so that arrested her.

He lay still for a few minutes after she had gone to eat her supper. Then he turned over and buried his face in the cushions.

"Oh God, if I were only ten years younger!" He stretched his lips on his set teeth. He thought rather bitterly of the fate that had brought Valerie to him as the last woman he should love instead of the first. He was romantic enough to think his life might have been very different. They had had two years together, even more than he had hoped in the beginning, and there was still more of it. She still loved him, he knew that. She was still happy there. They were not yet looking at each other with that premeditated and deliberate politeness that decent people used to disguise the death of spontaneity. Whenever he was well life was wonderful between them.

He did wish she had not spoken of his health. It was

the one thing he could not bear to be reminded of, the one thing he was trying to forget. He simply must not think of it yet. That awful suspicion—and her words had had an appalling effect upon it, had given it a kind of stability as fact. All at once he felt terribly alone. He could not lie there and think of that. He wanted her arms about him, wanted her life beating against his own to assure him that it was a sure and positive thing, and that it could not be spirited away from him. He got out of the hammock and went in to look for her. He had not heard her go out. He knocked on her door, and getting no response he went into her room wondering now if she had been hurt by his coldness. When he could not find her he was sure she had. He could have kicked himself.

He went round the house calling for her, and down to the boathouse, and back along the drive to the gate. He worked himself into the state of a lost child when she did not answer. When at last he saw her coming along the road, he hurried to meet her and caught her to him.

"Oh, don't go away from me," he begged, clinging to her.

"Why, my dear, my dear, I—I thought ——"

She wondered whatever had changed him so, and she wondered it again many times during the night.

## II

"Valerie, I want to go to Roland's Mills for a day or two to hunt up some fresh stories. I've heard of an Englishman over that way I'd like to see."

"Oh, good. Give my love to David Bruce, and tell him we haven't been divorced yet," she answered lightly.

He smiled back at her.

They had just finished lunch on a cool April day.

Dane's proposal did not disturb her in the least. He had many times gone off for a day or two after copy, and had never suggested that she go with him, nor had she asked to do so, knowing that she could not sleep in men's camps or lonely huts. She was glad now to hear that he was to be out in his launch, for he had been depressed the last two days, and she felt the trip would do him good. She saw him off later with a supply of food without a question in her eyes.

She spent the rest of the day with no sense of loneliness. She was becoming used, in a measure, to his absences. This was partly because they were not, as yet, so frequent as to be continually depressing. The interludes meant so much.

And then she was becoming absorbed in her first novel. It was crudely written as far as she had gone, she knew, and would take a lot of polishing, but the thing that interested her was the power to create people in her own imagination. It was a wonderful diversion. She had starved considerably for companionship till she had met Dane, and now she discovered she could make people to please herself, she could make them talk as she wanted people to talk, make them live as she wanted people to live, and she found they became extraordinarily real. And it was becoming more and more interesting to explore her own mind, to see what would come out of it in a morning, to see what her people would say and do, for they had surprising ways of their own; they would defy her intentions sometimes, and scamper off on her pages and do things of their own accord. The whole thing enormously diverted her, and she felt now that if she kept on she would some day succeed with this thing.

And so it was that she worked and played away the day after Dane left without thinking much about him. In the

evening she lay in his hammock listening to the crickets and rather enjoying the mood of sweet melancholy that the autumn night gave her. The wind had changed from the west to the east, but she hoped the rain would not come before Dane got back.

She wished the boys would light up the den, for she liked to look into it from the outside, but when their master was away they always kept his rooms in darkness, and she had never attempted to go into them or change a single one of his ways. She had no vulgar curiosity about him. It would never have occurred to her to look over his desk or papers in his absence. She had never thought about possible relics of other women. What did those things matter? She sneered at the people who thought they did. She had never even tried the doors of his back rooms to see if they were locked, and she had never yet set her foot in those two rooms. She knew that the things she did not know about Dane would never be learned by poking about among his belongings.

She drew the possum rug up over her and drifted into speculation about the future. She was absorbed and contented at present, realizing the chance she had to work, but she wondered what she would do when her novel was finished. Of course she wanted it to come out in London. She was rather sniffy about colonial undertakings. And how would she get it to London? Would Dane be willing to go with her, and if not, what?

But she shelved that disturbing question. She went inside, closed the study door, and ate her supper by the dying fire, mooning there for some time because she found the coals good company. It was nearly midnight when she stepped out of her bedroom window to her cot. She stood by the railing a moment looking up at the faintly clouded stars before she lowered her screen. Something

startled her to stretch out her head and to listen. Then she heard the launch more distinctly, and she knew well the pulse of its engine. It came at slow speed into the bay, and a little later she heard the rattle of a chain and the closing of the boathouse doors. And then the stumbling steps on the other side of the house. The dogs roused a minute to growl and then lay still.

Valerie found herself very wide awake. Why had Dane come back? He had hardly had time to get to Roland's Mills, even if he had gone at top speed all the way. She sat down on the edge of her cot with a hard pain inside her. If he had meant to get drunk why had he lied to her? He had never lied before. For the first time a real despair took possession of her. This thing was growing on him, was getting ahead of him. The time would soon come when the interludes would not balance the black moods, would not compensate.

She got into bed and lay with her eyes open staring into the blackness under the verandah roof.

She asked no questions of Lee at breakfast, and the boy said nothing about his master. She wondered if she was supposed to know that Dane was back so that she would keep away from his side of the house. At times like these she felt like an outsider in the place, as if she had no part there at all. She felt more than usually upset that morning, and could only make a pretence of working. Her characters seemed unreal, their actions trivial and their emotions silly. She could not get hold of them at all.

When he brought her lunch Lee said: "Meester Barington back. He not well. He wish himself alone."

Valerie knew it was useless to be angry with the boy who could do so much more for the sick man than she could. But it was just this that maddened her. And she reflected what a grim Nemesis it was that should have brought to

her the kind of thing she had supposed she wanted. One of her reasons for hating marriage had been the boring and ugly physical intimacy of so much of it. But Dane had imposed none of the things she feared upon her. She had never seen him unshaved. She had never seen him dress or undress. He had been even more fastidious and delicate than she was. He had never come near her when he was ill. She had never been asked to lift her finger to do a thing for him. And now she hated what she had thought she desired. It seemed so cold and inhuman. It made her feel she was failing him in vital ways. But there was nothing she could do about it.

That afternoon she rode through Dargaville and out to the coast. The gully was deserted, and the tent no longer there. They had been down together after the cottagers left, but the things had been brought home two weeks before. She looked at the place where she had first heard of Dane, and thought of the glorious hours they had had down there. Try as she would she could not keep from her mind the ominous sense that the glory of their adventure was departing. She galloped back and forth on the beach till she felt better.

It was gaily enough on the way home that she stopped in front of the *News* and whistled for her paper. She fancied Bob looked at her a little intently as he came out with it. And then as she rested before dinner she read what had happened to Dane.

### III

He had left her with every intention, as he had said, of going to Roland's Mills. He intended to get to Aoroa for the night, to make an early start, and to get round into the Otamatea and to pass their honeymooning place

in the early morning. It did not alarm him that he wanted to get away from Valerie for a few days. There were times when he liked to get away from her because he so enjoyed going back to find her there.

He was about a mile above Dargaville, and looking up at a pile of cumulous clouds, when he felt the launch bump something. He had not noticed anything conspicuous on the water ahead of him. Looking back he saw a horrible thing, the water-bloated face of a man. He gave a shuddering groan and felt instantly nauseated. Automatically he ran on for a few yards, then he slowed down and began a tormenting wrestle with himself. He wanted to run on and leave it. It made him sick even to think of it. What did it matter what happened to it, a hideous dead thing? But somebody would want it. And if he left it now it might sink, and never be heard of again, and women and children might go on crying for it. And he could not face anyone with the tale that he was afraid of it, that he loathed it. He looked up and down the river. There was nothing in sight. No one would ever know he had seen it. But he would know himself that he had seen it and deserted it.

"God damn it!" he raged. "Why does this happen to me?"

He turned the launch back, went alongside it and looked at it. He broke out with an oath, an explosion rare to him. He knew the dreadful face. It was that of an Australian, who had drifted six months before to one of the mills on the river. He had been a jolly reckless chap, and Dane had had many a drink with him. Now he knew he could not leave him to drift down the river. There was an irresistible human cry in the pulpy eyes upturned to the sky and in the peeling face. Grinding his teeth Dane took a handkerchief out of his pocket, and with nausea



threatening to overcome him, he tied it round the head, for he could not bear to feel it staring at him. He saw he could never get the body into the launch. Indeed, he could not have borne to have it there. And he was afraid it would fall to bits. He had an appalling moment wondering what on earth he was to do with it. Then with his pocket knife he cut holes in the coat. He tied a rope through them and fixed it to the stern of the launch. He tried to wash his hands, shrinking from them. The perspiration stood out on his forehead when he was finished. He started slowly down the river, feeling he would go mad with that trailing after him.

Bob Lorrimer, Doctor Steele and Mac were standing near the barroom door when Dane plunged in as if he were followed by all the devils in hell.

"What is it, Barrington?" asked Bob anxiously, thinking at once of Valerie.

Dane did not see what he meant. "A corpse," he shuddered, "at my boat. I ran into it coming down." And he went on up the stairs to wash his hands.

Even before Doctor Steele and Bob had got the body into the hotel on a stretcher Dane was at the bar drinking whisky, and when he was called upon by the constable for evidence he was already reckless.

"What the hell do you want in the way of evidence?" he raged. "Isn't it a corpse? I found it in the river, curse it! What more is there to say?"

"Look here, Mac, don't let him get 'drunk," said Bob aside.

Mac grinned. "You bloody fool, you can't stop a man in that mood. He's got stacks of stuff at home anyway. And he's better drunk than seeing that ——— corpse all night."

Later on in the evening Mac and Doctor Steele got Dane upstairs.

"I wonder why he had to find that thing?" said the doctor, looking down upon him as he lay on the bed. "Borrow came down half an hour before. It wouldn't have hurt him to pick it up."

"Oh, there ain't no reason in this —— —— world," growled Mac.

#### IV

Valerie also felt there was no reason in the world when she read that Dane had run into that calamitous object. Her first feeling was one of blind rage that such things were always imposed on the people who could least endure them. She stamped about the garden that night shouting her little defiance at the stars. She was roused against the fates on behalf of Dane. But when this mood wore itself out she was a little weary, and though she would not have admitted it, a little resentful that he should be so sensitive to hurt.

As it grew near lunch time the next day she hoped she was going to hear from him. Not only because she missed him, but because it would mean that he was better. She had not worked well that morning. His personality seemed to clutch at her through the walls. She might have worked if she had known he was away, but now the thought of him lying alone there somewhere distracted her.

But he did not appear at lunch. She went out to garden afterwards, for nothing so well soothed her.

At half-past four Lee called from the verandah. "Your tea, Meesis Barrington."

There was no sign of Dane, and almost before she had

finished dusk came down upon the garden. The days were shortening fast, and when it was cloudy as it now was it was dark at five. The atmosphere was heavy, threatening rain.

Valerie tried to settle down to read till dinner. She did not like to play the piano lest Dane be out in his cot asleep and be wakened by it. But she could not sit still. She was desperately restless. She went out to walk on the drive. For the twentieth time she told herself this way of living could not go on. When Dane was well again she would talk it out with him. It made her feel like an alien in the house. She could not stand it any longer. She told herself she would rather see him drunk, unshaved, sick, if it had to be that kind of thing, than go on with this disrupting isolation. She would enter into the fight with him, make him win.

Where was he now, she wondered. She sneaked round in the shrubs to his side of the house with a strange feeling that she had no business to spy upon him. The canvas blinds on the sleeping end of his verandah were down, and she could see nothing there, and the blinds of his den were down also, but the room was lit within. She stood hidden looking from one French door to the other, looking for what she knew not. But she could not get it out of her head that something tragic beyond her imagining was going on in that room. It was as if she could see the shadows of battling figures posed against the blinds.

She grew frantic thinking of it. Inaction was the one unendurable thing to a person of her disposition. A clod might have stood it, but not a person of her imagination.

She stole back to the front verandah and sat down. The glow from the study fire streamed out through the window and cast distorted streaks of light up and down the trunks of trees. She turned her chair to look into

the room. This was her favourite room. It expressed the best of Dane, she thought. She liked the den well enough for exotic hours, but she always felt she wanted to go out into the air afterwards, or to come to sit in the study with its satisfying balance. Everything about it seemed just right. It was a beautiful room to play in, to read in, to eat in, to talk in, or to dream in by the fire. There was only one thing lacking in it now—the presence of the man who had made it.

As she looked in, Lee carried in the dinner tray set only for one. With a chill at her heart she went inside.

But there was a folded note on the tray. She did not see it till she had eaten her soup.

“Val, dear, play to me to-night, and please don’t worry about me. I’ll be all right in a day or two.”

Tears oozed out of her eyes and ran unheeded down her cheeks.

She sat down at the piano at eight o’clock, determined that she would play her way back into his mind. Abnormally intensified, she never played better than she did that night. As she went on the wind, which had been increasing all the evening, blew up to a gale, and moaned and whined about the chimneys and the eaves. Her mood moved with it. She played the stormiest things she knew from Tschaikovsky, Beethoven and Chopin, and when her hands dropped from the keys it was well after eleven, and the fire behind her had burned low. The room moved with shadows from the two candles which flickered in the draught that came under the doors from the open window on her side of the house.

Valerie sat still at the keyboard for a few minutes, affected by the troublous suggestion in the wind. Then she sprang to her feet electrified. She had heard her name called, called as if it had come out of a long distance, a

weird sound like a wailing from the storm. Her pulses raced as she stood listening for it again. But she heard nothing more than the moaning about the old house and the swishing of the poplars and the pines. She walked to the hall door and opened it, straining her ears for sounds inside the house. She saw her supper on the hall table. She stole softly along as far as the bathroom. There was no light under the kitchen door. But there was a light under the door of the den.

She could see there was a fire by the ebb and flow of the light. There was no sound of any kind. She felt Dane was in there alone. He must have been listening to her playing. She felt a fierce impulse to open the door, to go in and see what he looked like, what he was doing. It seemed ridiculous that she could not. The first thing that restrained her was the thought that he might have fallen asleep, and not for worlds would she have disturbed him so. But she played with the impulse for some minutes. And then she hesitated, because whatever was going on in there was in a large sense his own affair, at least more his than hers, she felt. And that was the thought that turned her back.

She carried her supper tray into the study and sat down. Then she heard her name called again. She wondered if her nerves were playing tricks with her. But it seemed a clearer call. This time she acted without thought. She went straight to the door of the den, opened it, and went in, closing it at once behind her. What she had expected she did not know, but she stood with her heart beating furiously. She looked at once at the lounge placed in front of a fire that had been banked up to burn most of the night.

Stretched out on his back upon it, with his face turned to the ceiling, Dane lay in a curiously lifeless way, with

one arm hanging over the side and the other flung across his breast. His skin was so colourless and his features so peaceful that for a shattering second she thought him dead. Then she saw a smile play about his mouth. She recovered herself, but was afraid to stir, thinking him asleep. She saw that he was partly dressed under his blue silk dressing-gown, that he had on socks and evening slippers, and that he had evidently recently shaved. There was a small cut on his chin and a tiny streak of blood. She wondered if he had meant to have dinner with her, but had been unequal to the effort.

A piece of wood fell in the fireplace making quite a startling noise. She jumped nervously herself. But she saw he did not stir. Then something about the dead whiteness of his face arrested her. She spoke his name fearfully. She moved up to the lounge and spoke again. He did not move.

Seeing him thus for the first time unmistakably under a drug it came to her with the force of a blow, though she had felt for some time that he was using something to put himself to sleep. She looked at his wrists, and it was not the first time she had looked there for significant marks. She knew nothing of the effect of narcotics. She had thought once or twice lately that he had had a strange expression in his eyes, that he had looked through her and beyond her as if he were seeing things not of the earth. How far he had gone with this thing she did not know. Whether he was powerless against it she did not know. How long it would be before he was unbearable because of it she did not know. But she imagined the worst.

And then as she looked at him a smile again mysteriously came to life upon his face, and flitted about it, and faded away. She felt a sudden choking pity for him. At

least, poor soul, he was at peace. At least he had a respite from that invisible and pitiless foe that she knew he fought. She moved him a little on the lounge, and sat down on the edge of it and stared into his face. It had never seemed more beautiful in spite of the bluish hollows under the eyes.

She wondered when he had taken the drug, whether it was after she started to play, and if so why then? Had the thought of her been too much for him? Something happened to her as she sat there looking at him, a crisis in the evolution of feeling. But she was not conscious of it till afterwards. She was caught now by a flood of pity and affection. The impulse came to her to lie down with him, to be with him when he waked, and to help him to fight back to himself. She went out to the supper tray, and drank a glass of wine. She put out the candles in the study, and saw that the fire was safe.

He did not stir as she moved him to make room for herself. She thought she could stay there all night. But her mood of passionate affection wore itself out as she lay there uncomfortable and fiercely awake, listening to the storm break upon the house. And there was something uncanny about Dane, not himself, lying there beside her, like a dead man. The hot air of the scented room suffocated her. Something absolutely alien to her health and balance irritated her. The lashing of the sleet upon the roof, and the queer straining sounds made by the creepers fighting for their hold against the wind kept her nerves continually on the jump. And she got a hopeless feeling about her ability to help him when he woke.

After all, she was doing him no good by being there. And she had satisfied the sacrificial mood she had been in. With more of a dull dismay in her mind than anything else she got up about one o'clock and went back to

her room. It was too wet to go outside. The rain beat against her canvas blind, and underneath it along the floor. She stood by her open window till she began to shiver, but the cold air made her feel better. Her nerves calmed down. She felt very tired. She got into her indoor bed and before very long fell asleep.

## V

The storm wore itself out during the night, and the next day was fresh and clear. Early in the morning Dane staggered out of his room with a couple of rugs, and got into his hammock. After he had revived himself with the coffee Lee brought him he began to wonder what had happened to him. It was some time before he got it clearly in his mind. He remembered coming home, he remembered his struggle with his nerves the previous day. He remembered he had wanted music. And then he had gone into his den to listen to it, and he had seen that dreadful face, the face of the drowned man. He could remember no more. He was distressed to learn what day it was. What would Valerie think of him? He had told her he was going to Roland's Mills. She would think he had lied.

He lay still all the morning fighting nausea, wishing he were dead, wondering why he had not ended it all up there on the Hokianga harbour that night. He told himself he was a miserable weakling, and that it was a wonder Valerie had ever loved him, but she had, and still did in spite of all this, that was the wonderful thing. And thinking of that his will began again its fight with his body.

At lunch time he asked Lee what she was doing, and was glad to hear she had gone out to garden. He made a desperate effort to shave so that he could take tea with her, but he did not feel equal to meeting her till dinner.



Then he sent a message to her. It seemed to him that she came as buoyantly as usual onto the verandah where he lay in the dusk. He felt like a sick child as she came up to him and leaned over him and put her arms under him. It was the most comforting thing he had ever felt.

"Val, I did mean to go to Roland's Mills," he said miserably.

"I know you did, Dane. I read in the paper what happened. Please get well, and don't think about it any more. I know you were not lying to me."

Happily he did not see that it took some resolution to put the tenderness and understanding she did into her voice.

She sat down by him and took his hand and stroked it, and did not attempt to talk. It grew dark. Lee came to the door and asked where they would have the meal.

"Is it too cold for you out here, Val? I want to stay outside."

"Not at all. I'll get a coat."

And afterwards she sat and then lay there with him till two in the morning, keeping the longest and strangest silence she had ever kept with any human being. But he was afraid to be alone, she saw that. Once when she moved he clutched at her fearfully, and that pathetic appeal had given her a strange thrill. Only when she saw that he had gone to sleep did she very carefully work her way out of the hammock, cover him up carefully, and steal inside.

He was much better the next morning and walked in to her as she sat in her study. She got up and kissed him and found that she was really as glad as ever to have him restored to her.

"Valerie, dear, you are very good to me," he said humbly. "And will you come on the launch with me for

a run about the rivers? Three or four days. I want to stay out in the air. We can keep warm."

"Why, of course I will, Dane. I'd love it myself."

And he was so much better at the end of the trip that Valerie almost forgot what she had felt as she sat beside him on the lounge in his den.

## CHAPTER XIX

### I

**V**ALERIE and Dane were at Rotorua when the war cloud burst over Europe at the end of July. For two weeks he had been much in the company of some Englishmen talking over the rumours. One of the travellers had been only recently in the Balkans. They all thought it would blow over till they read the cable telling of the Russian mobilization.

Dane was much more roused than Valerie over the news of the next few days. His health, much improved by a month at the resort, was further improved by his preoccupation with the outbreak of war. On the first of August they packed up, weeks before they had intended to, and returned to Auckland, where Dane could get the news as it reached the newspaper offices. He spent a good deal of time in them with the little groups of men who sat waiting for news, frantically waiting for news, cursing the lack of news, hating their isolation from the maelstrom of action. There seemed to be a conspiracy of silence against newspaper men. The cables were meagre and fragmentary. The Government, probably left much in doubt itself, kept a maddening silence.

And because of this lack of information, any man who had any European knowledge, any wide knowledge of international affairs, above all, any knowledge of German schemes and philosophy, was listened to with keen attention. Dane had lived in Germany, and had read and seen something of the policy of blood and iron. He knew Nietzsche and Treitschke. He knew German history, and

he had seen in many countries of the world how their tentacles were reaching out into the entrails of other nations. So when he walked into his club men gathered round him to congratulate him on the articles he was writing on the crisis, and to his amusement his reinstatement was complete.

And Valerie, with her imagination now fired by his, as the possibilities of the war's lasting were discussed, began to look ahead and to wonder what her part and his in it might be. And forgetting personal things she consented at last to go home to dine with her father and mother, providing relatives she disliked were not present.

In the week before they returned to Dargaville Davenport Carr invited several men to dinner to meet Dane. Valerie, the only woman present besides her mother, was content to be still, to sit back, and to watch Dane lead the talk. In her eyes he had never looked handsomer, and he had certainly never talked better. She did not mind that he had forgotten her, that he was lost in the subject of the Belgian opposition. She had again that curious feeling as to his phantom-like quality that arrested her at most unlikely times. She forgot all about his weaknesses as she listened to him talk that night. They did not matter at all. What mattered was that he could rise above them as he had done that last month or two. Indeed, as far as she knew, he had never touched drugs or drunk to excess since the night she had sat by him in his den. All she saw that night was the picture of his pale and brilliant face surrounded by a ring of tense and interested faces, listening fascinated to all he had to say.

Valerie's spirits went down as they packed up to go home. Things were just beginning to happen about them. The little Dominion was moving. Men were coming into the cities from the back-blocks everywhere to form the

Legion of Frontiersmen. Everybody remembered the Boer war and the contingents that had sprung up in a night. It was this stirring all about them that caught Valerie's spirit of adventure, that excited her, and that made the return to Dargaville seem a very flat affair.

Most of the way home she was wondering what she could do if the war went on. No one had begun to think yet of the part women would play, but they had gone to the Boer war in all kinds of capacity. And both she and Dane were free, and had the money to go. She did not doubt then that she would be able to persuade him to go, or that it would take any persuading.

When the steamer reached Dargaville Roger Benton, George Rhodes, Bob, Allison and Bolton and several other men were gathered together on the wharf. It did not strike Valerie at first that, eager for news, they had come to meet her and Dane. It ended by their all going to Mac's to dinner. Mysteriously the hotel filled up with men, and seeing what they wanted Dane turned himself into an informal lecturer, and stood half-way up the stairs talking all he knew of the last week's doings to a tense group gathered about in the hall and round the bar door.

It was after ten o'clock when they went out to the *Diana*, which Dane had left in one of Mac's boathouses. Valerie had a funny feeling as she got into it that she was being cut off from the world, as if she had been dropped down a deep well. It was bad enough to live in a place like New Zealand at such a time, isolated from the biggest thing in history, a thing that was actually going on in your own day and not in dreams, but it was worse to be going away from such avenues of information as there were. She wondered how Dane could do it. And just for a minute she felt a hostility to him of which she was ashamed.

She wondered what he was thinking of as they went in silence up the Wairoa. He had been talking continuously for hours and was tired. Was he thinking as she was of the marching men, of the men who were being huddled into hastily improvised camps, of the men hurrying into special night trains, of the scares from the sea, of the rumours that had sprung up everywhere? She did not know.

He ran the *Diana* at full speed by the light of a half moon, and sat tense, his head a little forward, his hair pressed under a tweed cap, his hand ready to turn the launch from any snag that the river, flooded by heavy rains, might spring upon him.

Valerie had a sense of unreality when they turned into their own little bay. The peace of it was a challenge to the folly of a world gone mad. And why not turn one's back on a foolish world and wait in peace for it to come to its senses again?

As they stood on the landing stage, their bags beside them, Dane took off his cap, turned to her, and put an arm about her shoulders.

"It's good to come back to this, dear, isn't it?"

She gave one look into his face and forgot the war.

The house was lit up. The dogs bounded to welcome them. The boys came out to the verandah. The light streamed through the three windows of the den into the shadows. And there was a delicate breath of spring about the still garden. The world was falling to pieces outside, but the old station kept its air of incorruptible peace.

## II

Two months later Valerie rode alone one afternoon into Dargaville to get the papers and the mail. Dane had not been well for a day or two, and he had lain in his ham-

mock all that morning reading papers and feasting his eyes on a bed of anemones and rununculas that she had made on that side of the house. In spite of the fine spring weather Valerie did not feel at all cheerful. And it was not the news from the outside world that was the sole cause.

She stopped in front of the *News* and whistled the call of the tui. As Bob came out to her with the paper she sensed something from his manner. He looked up soberly into her face.

"Val, I'm off," he said simply.

"Off," she repeated.

"Yes, Johnson and I are off in two weeks' time. We're volunteering for the Expeditionary Force. Why do you look surprised? We'll all be in it soon, if it goes on."

"You are off," she repeated again. "Oh. I'm not surprised, Bob. Dash it! I wish I could go, could do something."

"Well, the women will be in before long. And you can start now, if you want to. Benton asked me if I thought you would come back here. I don't know whom he can get. Men are going to be scarce."

"Oh, good Lord, Bob! I don't want to come back here. I want to go to the war, to Egypt, or wherever it is you men are all going."

"Think you could stand it?" grinned Bob. "It's going to be pretty ugly, you know."

"Dash it, Bob! I can stand a thing if I have to. You never will understand me, will you? I could nurse a man the war had smashed up, but I'd hate to nurse a man who had deliberately fooled about in the rain and got pneumonia."

Bob looked up at her wondering what it was she was regretting. But he was not preoccupied with women now.

He was concerned excitedly, doubtfully, and a little fearfully with very different things.

As she rode home Valerie's mind was in a ferment. The thing that Bob had told her had shown her with the force of a revelation the tormenting division of her own interests.

For a month after she and Dane had come home he had been absorbed in the war, had written excellently about it, and had seemed so much better in health that her fears about him had subsided. Then for no reason that she could see he had slumped. He had kept on writing, but under stimulants again, she feared. Sometimes she had not seen him till night and then he was often listless.

But they were still in love with each other. It was still possible for him to surprise her, to move to her like a shining presence. She loved not a bit the less his looks, his grace, and the compelling music of his voice. She cared more than ever for his love-making. But he did not overwhelm her as he had done in the beginning. She was recovering dominant factors in her personality that he had submerged for a time. There was a large part of her that loved a fight, that loved riding head first at obstacles and sweeping over them, and the work on the *News* had taught her what she could do in that direction, that she could think and act quickly, revel in responsibility, and make people do their best for her. And she craved to use these gifts, to show what she could do now. But she wanted the big field, not the little one.

And though life at the old station had now its own tests for endurance they were not the ones she wanted.

Dane was still lying in his hammock when she took him the mail. As she sat down, Lee brought out the tea-tray. Dane put his correspondence aside, ready to be sociable.

"Don't you want to read your letters?" she asked.



"Yes, presently." He took his cup from her, sipped from it and put it down on the red table beside him.

"What is it, Val?" She felt annoyed that she had let him see something was the matter with her.

"Bob's going, and Johnson. They're off in two weeks."

Dane took another sip of tea and lit a cigarette. Then he looked out into the garden before turning his face to her.

"We needn't be sorry for them. I guess they want to go."

"Oh, I'm not sorry for them, Dane. I'm envying them. I never wanted to be a man before, but I do now." She spoke with a little impatience.

He gave her a quick look. "What do you want to do, Val? Aren't you going on with your novel?"

"Well, I've not been getting on very well with it lately."

"Do you want to stop it and get into something?"

This was the first time he had put the question to her. He had been thinking about asking it for a week or two, for it had seemed to him that something was working in her. But he had seen no sign that she wished to get away.

"Oh, I don't know," she answered evasively, wondering why she could not tell him frankly what she did want.

"Do you want to go back to the *News* now that Bob is going away?"

"Oh, heavens no! Not there, no."

"Well, what is it, dear? Do you want to go to Auckland, to get into something bigger there?"

"Would you come too?"

He looked at her and away again. He knew it was the first serious challenge that had passed between them.

"I don't know about going for any length of time," he said quietly. "I can work better here. But wouldn't

you go without me? You can if you wish to, you know."

The words fell like clumps of lead on Valerie's ears, and she must have shown something of what she felt. He turned his face away from her and stared out into the trees. The way he set his mouth, as if he were shutting off intolerably painful things from expression, upset her. She could never bear to hurt him. To his astonishment she got up from the table, and struggled into the hammock beside him and clung to him.

He turned to her and pressed her face against his own.

"What the devil is it, old girl? If anything is troubling you won't you tell me?"

"I don't want to go without you. I couldn't go without you."

"But you want to go?"

"Well, I feel I ought to do something."

He said nothing to that, and they lay still for some time. Then she raised herself and looked at him.

"Please, dear, I'm silly. I really don't want to go away at all."

She got up and went in to change her clothes, and in a short time he heard her playing softly a berceuse of Chopin's that he particularly loved.

He lay as she had left him, his cigarette burned out, his eyes watching the flitting of a fantail about the honeysuckle, and his mind working on the question as to how much she really did wish to go.

Two weeks later they stood in the early morning with a large portion of the population of Dargaville to see Bob and Johnson and a number of other men off to Auckland. Father Ryan was on board to accompany the men as far as the city. Valerie stood with Bob till the last minute. Dane kept away from them, talking to men from up the

river. And he made himself very detached in manner all that day.

## III

It was late on in the spring when they had finished lunch, that he handed her a cable from one of the largest of the Sydney papers asking if he would consider going to Egypt as its correspondent.

Her face lit up, and she became vividly alive in a moment.

"Oh, how wonderful! That's the very thing, isn't it?" Her eyes flashed at him. Then she sobered at the look in his.

"Oh, Dane, don't say you won't take it!"

"Would that hurt you very much?" He was looking intently at her.

"Good heavens! You wouldn't think of turning down such a chance, would you?"

"Well, you couldn't go with me, Val, you know."

"But, but—I could go in some capacity separately from you. Dad can manage anything, you know. We have all the pull we want. And then we could meet there—really I don't see—oh, do consider it, Dane."

She saw his mouth stretch on his teeth. She looked down at the cable again and read the date. It was a week old. She raised her face. She looked at him and past him.

"You've refused."

"Yes, Val, I've refused. Don't look like that, old girl. I cannot bear it."

He got up from the table, went down the steps into the garden and round the front of the house. "She thinks I'm afraid to go," he kept saying to himself.

She sat still, feeling that the bottom had fallen out of

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the world. She felt rooted to her chair. But she saw that every minute only widened the gulf of that misunderstanding. And something in the expression of his eyes gripped her heart, as if she had seen a child falling onto a red-hot stove. She jumped up, ran through the house, and saw that he was stumbling along the drive to the gate, going like a man who neither knew nor cared where he was going. He did not stop nor turn as she ran calling after him. Near the gate she pulled him to a standstill.

"Dane, I didn't mean to hurt you. What did I say? Please don't be hurt. It makes me sick." Her voice broke. "Dane, do you hear? Please listen to me. I want to know why you refused. Is there anything you are keeping from me? Won't you tell me, please?"

He let his arms fall over the top rail of the gate, and dropped his head upon them.

"What is it, Dane? Aren't you well enough to go? What is the matter? Please, I'm going to know now."

Then he looked up. "Part of it is that I am not well enough to go, Val. I'm not afraid to go. But a man has to be awfully fit to travel in all weathers and eat all kinds of grub. It is my stupid stomach. I'd be sick most of the time, and that is not fair to the paper or to the man who could go and stick it."

"And the rest?"

"What?"

"The rest of the reason?"

For answer he dropped his head onto her shoulder. And she knew she could never go as long as he felt like that.

Then she felt him stiffen himself. He stood up straight as if he were bracing himself against an obstacle.

"Val dear, I wish you to do what you want to do without thinking of me. I quite understand your wanting to

be in this thing. I do really. And if you want to go I want you to go. You see the work I can do is here. The papers want my stuff, and I can write it here, better here than anywhere, as you know. But that is no reason why you should not go to Auckland if you want to go, and further, Val, if you want to go further. Please believe you are free, once you make up your mind. But you must be happy about it, Val, about staying here, if you stay. I cannot have you unhappy about it." His voice ended harshly.

She could not look at him and tell him she wished to go. She could not look at him as he stood there and even feel that she wished to go. She threw her arms about him.

"Dane, I won't consider going away without you. Do you hear, dear?"

"Yes," he said, much comforted, putting his lips to hers.

There followed days of peace and understanding between them, an interlude, a deliberate shelving of the future, for Dane knew she was not completely happy, and she knew she could not keep up the appearance of being so forever. But because they had so much in common, because they could always be happy in the launch, always aware of the beauty of the garden, they could keep the other side out of sight. But, watching her when he could, he saw that she was growing paler, that often she looked as if she had not slept, that her manner was becoming deliberately cheerful.

He wondered how he could really get at her state of mind, at how much she was keeping from him.

## CHAPTER XX

### I

ONE night in the beginning of January Valerie walked alone back and forth along the drive on what she called her side of the house. She had not seen Dane all day. She had asked nothing about him, and supposed him gone to Dargaville. For a week he had been aloof from her, tired and listless. She did not know whether he had done any work. He had looked at her in a queer appealing way, she had thought, several times, and she thought she had done wonders in the way of ignoring his mood.

She had remembered when she woke that morning that it was the third anniversary of their wedding day. Though she was as unsentimental as ever about the conventional ceremony she had wondered if Dane would give any sign of memory, and was absurdly hurt that he had not. It was the first time he had forgotten to tease her about it. And now she had not even seen him.

Whether it was remembering it or what, she had come to another crisis this night. She was taking stock again of her endurance, wondering desperately how many months she could go on. For it seemed to her now that Dane was going down hill fast, and she had lost every scrap of hope that he would ever be better. She was certain beyond all doubt that he could not save himself, and that she could not save him. If their love could not do it nothing could. She had suffered tortures during the last two months over the lines that were deepening on his face and over the sallowness that was tainting his fine skin. And

she knew she could no more bear to stay and helplessly watch that descent than she could have borne to stand on a beach and watch a gallant ship going to pieces on the rocks. For that was the most tragic thing about it, it was a gallant ship. If he would only degenerate comfortably as her father had done! But he was dying hard. And he was only forty. She could not stand it. And the war, which was remaking so many men, could do nothing now for him.

But when was she to go from him? How was she to go from him?

She could not forget the pledge she had given him in her own mind, her determination to be fair, to give him what she owed him. But there was the rub. What exactly did she owe him when it came to considering concrete things? How was she to decide when she had reached that obscure boundary line, that elusive boundary line, that disconcertingly wavering boundary line where consideration for him must end and consideration for herself begin? Could fairness and loyalty be computed in so many months or years of one's company, in carefully modulated tones and carefully regulated moods? How many hours and nights of sleepless struggle were to be endured before one came to the last? What was endurable? What was unendurable? How many chances should one give a person? How many times should one renew one's hope, how many times make the effort to forget?

And there was the strange fact that she still cared, that when he came to a high mood (he had not had one for weeks, she remembered) he could still carry her with him. But she could not bear to think that sex was the best she could do for him now. She did not realize how much, apart from that, her company still meant to him. And she was afraid of being chained to him by that alone. She

knew she would come to hate him if that were the chief bond.

"I don't want to stay till I hate him. I cannot stay till I hate him. It would ruin it all. But is that what I have to do? And why should I ever hate him? What is the matter with me? Why can't I just stay, and stay, and wait—oh, why?"

The fact that he had told her to go did not help her at all. He could look at her and say go, but his eyes and his spirit chained her there. And she could not face the actual packing up and going out of the gate for the last time. Kissing him for the last time. Eating the last meal. Impossible! Good Lord! How did people ever get away from each other? And she was not thinking of herself then. She could see him left alone, lying alone in his hammock, wishing she were there to play to him, looking for her to come through the study door. She could see him pacing the verandah and the garden alone with those terrible despairs of his. She could see him sitting down with his knees drawn up to his chin and the dogs licking his face and hands. The lost child. She wished he had never told her that story of his boyhood; she always saw him like that when she thought of leaving him, that forlorn boy deserted by his father. And she knew she could never bear herself again in life if she deserted him.

And so after all, as she walked, she decided again as she had decided before. She would not leave him so long as his eyes could light up when she went through the study door, as long as anything she could do helped him to write, as long as he counted for something among people who were helped by the thing he was still able to do.

Sacrifice, was it? That boggy of her free and independent youth. That Frankenstein foe of individuality.



Well, what of it? She thought of what was happening in Gallipoli and France.

She had run through many shades of feeling as she walked. She had shed tears and stumbled, and had used her handkerchief frequently. She had stopped and looked up at the stars, and had stood still and stared at the ground. She had walked twice into the stream of light from a lamp in the study. Two hours of it, and worn out and ready to go on again, she went inside.

## II

Dane had not gone to Dargaville as she supposed. Unable to sleep the night before he had gone out on the river and had wandered up and down creeks till at last he had fallen into a doze on the floor of the *Diana*. The sun was well up when he waked but he did not go home. He went to Te Koperu for some coffee, had some sandwiches made up, and drifted along up the shady bank of the Wairoa trying to screw himself up to the action he had known for some time to be inevitable.

He had been far more abstemious in the last months than Valerie had any idea of. He was suffering from abstemiousness. For weeks the only stimulant he had taken was coffee. He knew well enough as he drifted about in the launch that he had been listless and aloof from Valerie. For days now he had been wondering most of the time just how much of a mask she was wearing, whether she had come to the time when she would be happier away from him than with him. He had been puzzling about it. How was he to find out how much she wanted to go, how far she was disguising her feeling for his sake? He could only do it by getting her off her guard somehow. But she was never off her guard.

Then he got the idea that he would sneak home after dark that night and spy upon her. He did not take the launch into the bay, but secured it on the point further on, the point, he remembered, where she had trespassed. Then he made his way cautiously along the rocks among the trees and into the shrubbery in front of his house. As he moved forward he saw her white dress on the drive. In a dark suit himself he was invisible as he stood in a thicket of *micracarpa*.

Valerie came towards him, blowing her nose. She did not swing along. She walked unevenly kicking at stones in the path, stopping, going on again. She turned and disappeared along the drive, and appeared again. That time, as she moved in the line of light from the study, he was able to see her face. It startled him. Four times he saw it thus, desperate and haggard. He clenched his hands and set his teeth. Good God! Had she got as far as that in disillusionment without his knowing it? He was stunned.

He watched her go inside. A match came to light in her own front room, and then the lamp. He stole nearer till he could clearly see her face against a background of red curtain. He saw her take his picture and look at it. But there was no hatred in her face as she stared at it. The meaning in her expression came over him with the force of sudden revelation.

He crept off through the bushes and round to his back room and sat down on the step of the one door that opened outside. How long he sat there he did not know. It was a fine warm night. Weary of sitting and staring at the sandy path, weary of trying to think, of trying not to think, he got up at last and went to lie in his hammock. He dozed off in spite of himself, and did not wake till the sun came streaming through his cutting upon

his face. It was half-past five. He went very quietly into the house to the kitchen and washed and shaved there, as he often did when he did not wish to disturb Valerie by making sounds in the bathroom. Lee came in in his pajamas to know if he wanted anything, and Dane had him get the remains of a cold chicken for him, and told him to tell Valerie that he wanted to take her out on the river that afternoon. After he had changed his clothes and drunk a glass of wine, he went out and along to the place where he had left the launch the night before.

As he went down the river to Dargaville he thought it funny that the mere resolving to do a thing he had long shelved should give him such a feeling of strength. He remembered the mood of exaltation he had had up at Hokianga for days after he had decided not to shoot himself. Was it that when one had accepted Fate the relentless goddess gave one some potent stimulant to enable one to live calmly by her stern decrees?

As it was very early he went some distance beyond the town. Nothing was stirring there except men on the decks of a timber barque at the railway wharf. He was soothed by his aloneness in the new day. There had been a time in his life when eleven o'clock at night began the thrilling hours, but now, of all the twenty-four, he liked best the dawn.

But the dawns were tragic these days, he remembered, and he began to wonder how many men in Europe would be out of the world by night, never to see another day.

He turned back, and walked into Mac's pub as the first lot of breakfasters were finishing their second cup of coffee. He drank his with the big Irishman who asked him no questions, nor cast at him enquiring looks, though Mac did wonder what mood had brought him there so

early. Then Dane found Michael, and asked him to get a message to Doctor Steele to come to him there. When the physician arrived he took him upstairs to the room he always occupied when he spent nights in the hotel.

The doctor sat down on the one chair and waited. Dane walked to the window, where he stared out a moment. Then he turned back and looked down at the other man.

"Doc, do you know much about cancer?" he asked quietly.

The gloomy brown eyes did not change their expression as they looked up at him.

"I wouldn't call myself an expert. I wouldn't operate. Why do you ask?"

"My father died of cancer in the stomach. I've been wondering for some time if that is what I have."

There was a dead silence for a few seconds. Then the doctor spoke in his low monotonous manner.

"Cancer is hardly a thing to go wondering about. And there's a theory now that it is not hereditary. It may only be indigestion." He asked him several questions which Dane answered in a hard detached tone.

"It looks bad, Barrington, but really, it may only be indigestion."

"That's what I've preferred to think, Doc. I've shirked finding out. But I've got to know now."

"Go at once to Alleyne, and get him to make the tests. If it is that, he's the best man to operate, none better in the colonies. You mustn't let it go on."

"I guess 'letting' has nothing to do with it, Doc," said Dane with a twisted smile. "There is an inevitability about cancer, a damnable inevitability. It's that I don't like. I resent it. God! what a rottenly feeble thing a man is! Limited by his stomach! Regulated by

his stomach! Hounded by his stomach! Made or marred by his stomach! To think that that ugly uninteresting organ, a mess of a place, should be one's dictator, a thing made beyond one's control, ruined in one's youth beyond one's control! Ugh! Excuse me, Doc. I've faced it long enough. I ought to be used to the idea."

He walked to the window and looked out again before turning back.

"I say, Doc. You must promise me something."

"Yes?"

"You mustn't hint this to a soul. Under no circumstances must Valerie get a suspicion of it. She thinks I've got indigestion. You promise?"

"If you wish it, certainly."

"I more than wish it, I insist on it." He went on feeling a relief in talking to someone remote like the doctor. "You see, she wants to go to the war, and I want her to go. I particularly want her to get away now before I get any worse. If she knew of this, thought my days were limited, she'd think it her duty to stay by me to the end. She's so damned conscientious. And women, some women, have a ghastly capacity for self-sacrifice, and then they grow to hate the thing they have sacrificed themselves for. Many wives have told me that. And perhaps she would, and I couldn't bear it. I couldn't stand having her about me if she knew. I should be driven to end it. I shall do that some day when I can't stick it any longer. But she must get away. And then one has no right to impose such a thing as cancer in the stomach on any human soul—don't pity me, Doc; that's the last thing on earth I can stand——"

"God damn you, I'm not pitying you, Barrington."

Dane smiled at him.

"I don't know that you've got cancer. And if you

have, Alleyne may save you. For the Lord's sake, though, go at once and find out."

"I will. I'll go down to-morrow. And not a word, please, Doc."

"Oh, shut up, D. B. It's part of my work to be silent."

But all the same the doctor told himself that Valerie should know some day.

### III

When Dane left the hotel he walked through the town and onto the flat above. He had a craving to get out to the open sea. Though the interview with the doctor was not final it made no difference to his own feeling about it. But it struck him as he wandered across the hot sandspit that it would be funny if he discovered he had nothing but indigestion. Would that knowledge help him to get well enough to go away with Valerie? Perhaps it would. He had been hypnotized by the fear of the other thing for a good while, or rather he had accepted it as inevitable. He wandered aimlessly along, oblivious of the glaring sun, till he came by chance upon the little hollow on the cliffs where he and Valerie had had their first attaching talk. Thinking of it he remembered that he had left her very much alone for some time, and that here was a day, perhaps the last (though he had not at all clearly in his mind what he was going to do), a day that he could make a pleasant memory. For he felt fairly well, and now he wanted to comfort her for the night he felt she must have spent.

He walked back to the town hardly feeling the heat, and ran home as fast as he could. It was much too early for lunch, but he wanted to see her at once. He walked past the front steps and saw that she was sitting at her desk.

"Hello, Val, are you very busy?" he called.

The question seemed absurd to her. It seemed so long since she had done anything that was worth a pin. But she was glad to hear him call like that, and not disposed to question the reason for it.

"Not if you want me, Dane," she answered cheerfully enough.

As he came to the verandah she scrambled through the window. She was surprised at his air and saw that he had not been drinking, and that his eyes looked clear.

"Why, you are burned," she said.

"I've been running about in the launch a good deal, dear. I've been very unsociable lately, Valerie, but I feel better to-day. Let's go off now in the launch and find a cool spot."

Her face lit up as she felt he had come back to her. She had spent a lonely, wretched, sleepless night, and she was much afraid her eyes showed it. They did, but he made no remark upon them. He was lost in admiration of the manner in which she had greeted him. He deliberately shelved the past and the future, and determined, as he had many times in his life, to live for that day alone. And he knew he could make her live with him.

They went off with their lunch. At first he thought he would go to the rimu pool, and then he thought he could not face it. He chose another place, beautiful enough, a willow-girdled backwater, where they ate their lunch, and dozed happily in each other's arms.

Then they landed, made a fire and had tea, and went back as the sun dropped behind the range. They were both now in a real party mood. Valerie wondered what had happened to him. In moods like this he was irresistible. They dressed up for dinner and had it by one of the open doors of the den. Dane wore his black dinner

suit and a tucked white silk shirt that she thought very swagger. She knew he was trying to atone for his past aloofness, and she was only too glad to have him atone. What man could ever atone as he could, she thought. She herself wore one of her most charming garments, a diaphanous blue thing, appropriate not only to her mood, but to the climate of the day. They drank Benedictine in a mood of strange gaiety, and then he teased her about the three years.

"Why, I thought you had forgotten all about it," she said.

"Oh, no," he smiled over his glass at her, "I've been thinking of it." He looked round. Lee was not in the room. "And you still love me, don't you?" His eyes bored into hers.

"Indeed I do," she said, over-emphasizing her tone a little. He put his glass to her lips, and his at the same place. And then Lee came in with the chicken.

They smoked together in the hammock afterwards until he asked for music. When she had been playing for an hour he went round to the front and looked through the window at her. He saw that for the time being she was lost, lost in that wonderful world of harmony where she could forget even him. He was glad that she had that. He forgot what she was playing as he looked at her, trying to fix that picture of her in his mind. He wanted it to blot out the one of the night before.

How near had he come to her, he wondered. What secrets had she still hidden from him? Love had not meant domination for either of them, nor had either tried to clutch at the other's personality. They had kept their own freedom side by side, he thought, but even so, love was not enough. And he knew the end would have come some time, somehow.



He did not know exactly what he was going to do as he stood there watching her. He did not try to see beyond the fact that some time in the night when she had fallen asleep he would steal away from her, and would dress and pack and go off to catch the steamer in the morning. What happened after that would depend on what Dr. Alleyne had to say.

He came back to thinking of the picture she made at the piano. He wished now he had taken her hair down so that she would look what he had often called her, a goddess in *lapis lazuli* and gold. He had to smile a little sadly to himself. He was incurably a lover of colour and light. And she was colour and light. He suddenly remembered the hours were going. He went up the steps and in to her and flung his arms about her.

"Don't play any more. I want you," he said, taking her face in his hands.

#### IV

Dane managed to get an appointment the day after he arrived in Auckland with Dr. Alleyne, a fine and sensitive London surgeon who had come to the colonies for his own health a few years before.

"Where's the trouble, Barrington?" he asked as soon as Dane sat down, for he could give him only ten minutes that day.

"It's probably cancer of the stomach."

The doctor raised his eyebrows at the man who said this as if it were a matter of no concern.

"What makes you think that?"

His patient told him all he knew about it.

"Good heavens, man! Why haven't you come to me before?"

"Oh, I've shirked it. It won't make much difference in the end, will it?"

"It might have, if you had come to me a year ago. Look here, I'm pretty rushed these days. Can you be here at eight-thirty to-morrow morning?"

"Certainly."

At the end of four days Dane knew his fears were justified.

"You must be operated on at once, Barrington."

"What for?"

"What for?" Dr. Alleyne looked at him. He had already discovered he had an unusual patient.

"I was really speaking to myself," said Dane with a twisted smile. "Might the operation be fatal?"

"Well, I don't want to boast, but I don't have fatal operations."

"So I've heard, but you could make one fatal, couldn't you?"

The doctor stared across his desk at him.

"You might have a year or two after an operation, if you were careful, kept off stimulants, meat and drugs. Isn't it worth it? It seems to me the stuff you're writing these days ——"

Again the smile on the other man's face stopped him.

"If I don't have the operation how much time do you give me?"

"It will depend largely on yourself, whether you do as I've told you. But it is pretty far gone, and sometimes those things go quickly at the end. You might have six months. You might even have a year. It would depend on your endurance. It's a matter of slow starvation."

Dane got up from his chair and walked to the window. But he saw nothing of the street below. Indeed, he saw nothing that bore any relation to his immediate environ-

ment or to anything he had just heard. What he saw was a picture that had come into his mind many times in the last two years, a picture that had etched itself upon his brain. It was a picture of a snow-bound world, of a little hut, of a certain Captain Oates taking a "little walk" out into that undiscovered country, and of a certain Captain Scott, and his friends Wilson and Bowers, left behind to die composing a story that would never die.

He turned back to the doctor and dropped into the chair facing him.

"Alleyne, it's this way. If I have the operation, my wife will find out. She thinks now that I have indigestion. She wants to go to the war, and I want her to go. She must not know what is the matter with me if I live. So unless you will guarantee to finish me I won't have the operation."

They looked at each other, and the doctor put this story among the small collection of things he liked to think about when he got despairful of the human race.

"Barrington, I might agree that your life is in your own hands, but it isn't in mine. I couldn't do it yet, not with as much left to you as I think there is. If it came to the last weeks and one could be pretty certain there was nothing left but pain—well, I won't say. But you are asking too much of me now."

Dane stood up. "All right. Then I won't have it. I can stick it out for a while—I hear you are going to the front, Doctor?"

The surgeon looked up at him. "Yes, I go in about two weeks."

"As soon as that? I wish I could have gone and ended it that way. I'm going to stay here two or three days to fix up some business. If you have time to dine ——"

"I shall make time with pleasure."

## V

Valerie felt chilled when she read the note Dane had slipped under her door before leaving for Auckland. This erratic behaviour seemed so unnecessary. If he had had to go to town suddenly about a change in investments why had he not told her the day before? There was nothing disturbing about his having to go. But there was about the way he had done it. He was really carrying her own theories of independence much further than she carried them herself. And it seemed unfriendly.

She tried to console herself with thoughts of the day before, of the high mood he had been in, and of the fact that he really seemed better than she had seen him for some time. But something puzzled her. He had looked at her at times in such a curious way.

She tried to work that morning. She had put her novel aside, and was working disjointedly, jotting down in a note-book things she felt from day to day, her feelings about the war, stories of men going away, of women left behind, even some of her feeling about Dane. It did not satisfy her. It was at best something to pass the time. She was really frantic for action. She could picture herself leading groups of women, doing heroic things, working as few people could work. And here she was in a pampered garden, waited on by servants, her heaviest task the making of her own bed. She made up her mind the second day of Dane's absence that when he came back she would join Mrs. Benton in the organizing of the women of Dargaville; anything now but this sitting around.

On the third day she got a letter from Dane, affectionate and humorous, telling her the latest news, and on the

next she received one saying he would be delayed a few days longer. Then the temptation came to her to go while he was away. In spite of her attempts to put it out of mind the idea obsessed her, but always when it came to standing in her room and visualizing the packing process she could get no farther.

One morning it came over her more clearly than ever how strange her life with him had been. She had never really belonged there. She was like a person passing by. She had had that feeling often. The place was in no sense hers. She had never asked a person to it. She did not feel that even in Dane's absence she could have asked Mrs. Benton to come to tea, or to stay the night. It was completely his place, and even when he was away his spirit seemed to hover over it. His personality dominated it. And she had left no mark on it save the flower-beds. Perhaps that was one reason why she wanted to go. And yet she had been so happy here. She wondered if she would ever be as happy anywhere else.

She gardened, she rode, she walked, she played, she tried to write. She tried not to think. She tried to see some glory still ahead in the future for her and Dane.

And then she got the letter.

"Dear Valerie: I think you will understand what I am going to say. You and I went through a conventional ceremony three years ago that seemed absurd to us because it made impossible demands upon us, and so we made a ceremony of our own that we did mean to live up to. I don't know what you said in yours, but I can guess a little. But the thing I'm remembering now is what I said in mine. I wanted a little of your life, a little of your youth and love. There were times when I thought I had no right to it, and then I felt I had a right if you cared

enough, and if I was prepared to live up to my contract with you.

"Now, my dear, you have given me three years of your life, of your youth and love, and with them you have given me more than I ever dreamed you could. You have given me more than any woman ever gave me. You have done for me the greatest thing one person can do for another—you have justified my continued existence to myself.

"I have always known that some time there would be a descent from the mountain top. I have not unhappily anticipated it. I have been content with what the days brought. And as long as you were happy the garden was fair. But you have not been happy lately. You have been very fine about it. You have tried to keep it from me. But I know it now, and I cannot be happy in my old place any longer with you unsatisfied there. One side of you is being starved, and I will not have it go on. You want to go, and because you do I want you to, I insist that you do. And I cannot face thinking about it, arguing about it. I'm not going to let my health interfere. My mind is made up about that. And it would have come just the same if there had been no war. In the end you would have had to go.

"And Valerie dear, you will go now while we still love each other. You will go because we love each other. I will not have our three years spoiled by any silly ideas about sacrifice. Our three years shall end with that night last week. I shall keep the picture of you as you stood in my den with me after dinner, and as you sat at the piano. And you shall keep some picture you had of me that night. I insist that the dust of lingering farewells be not allowed to settle on them.

"Now, old girl, I cannot command you, but I beg you to carry out the spirit of this letter. I am getting out

of Auckland to-morrow for a week, and I wish to come home at the end of that time. Will you please be gone by then? You see I am turning you out, turning you out because you won't go of your own accord. And I know why you won't go. It is very wonderful of you, but you must go now, please. And I am a coward. I cannot stand in my garden and see you go out of it. So you must go before I come back.

"I have had a long talk with your father. He understands my action thoroughly. He will ask you no questions. The war will blanket your going away. So many are going now. I have left money with him for you, and later when you need more you shall have it. Of course, dear, I'm not regarding this as the end of everything. Please understand that. It is merely a change. Of course we shall write to each other. I want to hear from you before you leave Auckland. But please, please, do not think it necessary to leave any letter for me in the house. Please, don't, Val ——

"Dear old girl, I write all this because I am sure you will understand. Ever since I met you I have been, and for the rest of my life I shall be yours. And for a time at least you have been mine, perhaps as much as you will ever be anybody's. I'm not afraid that you will forget me. Perhaps you will remember too well.

"I'm rambling on—it is hard to end this.

"I'm not going to say good-bye.

"Just good-night—dear Valerie. Dane.

"P. S. Please don't turn me into a ghost. I should be the most uneasy spirit you have ever known. But if you do, let me have a cemetery all to myself. I insist on it. I will not be put with the relatives."

## VI

Valerie read it in the middle of a lovely summer afternoon after she returned from Dargaville, and it blotted out the sun for her and turned the day to blank despair. She stumbled through it twice, and though her eyes appeared to move she did not see the flower-beds, or the oleander bushes, or the magnolia tree. She sat as if paralyzed in every limb and in her mind as well. When Lee brought out her dinner she stared strangely at the boy as if he were a phenomenon. She tried to eat, but her throat seemed to be swollen shut.

As she paced the garden afterwards the opposing statements "I must go," "I cannot go" began a tormenting fire back and forth in her mind. But apart from that she could not think that night. She could only feel that she was one hard pain from head to foot. And she did not know why she was suffering so much about it. Here it was, her freedom to go. The one thing she thought she most wanted. And it meant nothing but pain to think of it. She slept at last and woke to wonder what had happened to her. Then she remembered the letter. She got out of her cot, clambered through her window, and took it out of the box on her dressing-table, and sat down in her nightgown to read it again. And now she perceived the strength of it, the finality of it, the something between the lines. There was something she did not know. Should she try to find it out or leave it? There was a desperate appeal in the letter. What was it he knew that she did not? The conviction came to her that whatever it was he did not think her equal to the knowledge. Or was it that he wanted to save her? In either case she felt she was failing him. That was a terrible thought on which to begin the day.



Then the postscript arrested her. She had not taken it in the night before. That humorous protest coming at the end of the rest of it astonished her. But he need have no fear, she told herself. She did not make the ghosts. They made themselves. And he had done the one thing that would keep him alive forever. She had a presentiment that henceforth all men who came into her life would have to stand or fall in comparison with him, that perhaps no man would ever again be seen by her for himself alone, but be merely a substitute. She might, indeed, remember him too well.

Then she saw that she was really thinking about going, that in spite of what he had said she was seeing the end of things as they had been. All the morning she walked about the garden unable to make a move. She looked about the beautiful old place, hearing the birds and the bees. Oh, no, she wasn't going away from here. It was absurd. She began to think of his coming back to it alone. She could see him coming along the path from the boathouse steps, to the verandah, listening for her—no, no, she must not think of it. She had to go, at the back of her mind she knew that, even though she went on all day protesting against the idea of it. And she protested against it all through a second day, making no attempt to pack.

She read his letter every day, and every day it seemed to be a greater thing, more heroic, more uncannily right. But every day the fact that they could not go on together seemed more hopelessly stupid and wrong.

On the third day she was surprised to read in an Auckland paper an article by him written to calm the feelings of people wrought up by recent alarms. It was a moving piece of work. It called to mind the picture of courage and endurance that Captain Scott and his companions

had given to the world. There was nothing in it to show that the man who wrote it was sitting in the midst of the ruin of his own hopes. Valerie wondered why she was amazed that he could write it at that time. Then she remembered that she could still play the piano.

That night she played for the first time since she had received his letter, and found that she could forget him. When she had played for a little over an hour she jumped from the keyboard electrified. She thought she had heard her name called. She was sure she had heard it called. It was a still warm night. There were no confusing sounds to deceive her. She stood rooted to the study floor, but she heard nothing more. She told herself she must not let her nerves play tricks on her. But she was afraid to go out of the room, afraid to look round, what of, she did not know. It was some time before she convinced herself there had been no call.

She went into her own study and sat down. What if Dane were back watching her? She had never known in his absences whether he were really away from the house or not. Supposing he had come back to try to keep her after all. Then she saw how much in those three days her mind had turned towards going, and the thought that he might come, that there might be a tragic scene or a battle of wills, tormented her. Her nerves got into a ferment. The thought that he was there grew upon her. But she could not bring herself to go through the house and see.

She had had the boys that afternoon bring her trunks and boxes from a room at the stables where they had been kept. They were now on her front verandah. The idea came to her to get away the next day. She could not stay another night in this place with the thought that Dane was watching her. She closed her window, drew the

blind, and began feverishly to prepare things to go into her boxes. She packed most of the night. It was a horrible business, and her lips bled from the setting of her teeth into them. She could not take her own furniture, and yet she felt she should leave as few reminders of herself as possible. The things one left behind were always so terribly pathetic. And yet if she left her furniture and her books it might give him the idea that she would come back. That might be a comfort. And she could not take those things with her out of New Zealand. Finally she packed only her clothes, and of the things he had given her, took only a little jewellery and the Lindsay drawing of his head.

The first thing in the morning she sent Lee into Dargaville to arrange for a carter to come that afternoon after the steamer had arrived so that her things could be put directly on board. She meant to get away without seeing a soul, or having anyone in the town know. They might be hurt afterwards, but she could not help it. She went through the day as if she were in a dream. It took her most of it to pack, and she was only just ready for the carter when he came.

The boys had not shown the least surprise at her orders or at her strange behaviour. She had been on the point that morning of asking Lee whether his master were home, but she decided not. It would have been worse to know he was than merely to fear it. After the carter had left she had Lee make her some sandwiches, and then told him she would not be there to dinner, and that she was going to town to join Dane.

"Yes, Meesis Barrington," he said, and she learned nothing from his tone.

She could not bring herself to take a last walk about the old garden. She had no need to assist her memory

with any last walk. She would never forget that garden, or any corner of it. And once she had put her rooms straight after her trunks had gone she was frantic to get away from it, and come to some peace of mind, if she ever would again.

It was with dry eyes, but with a heart of lead, that she walked out in the early evening, trying not to think of the glorious day when she had first walked in.

She did not go straight into the town. She went round the back of it out on the flat to the coast road, and by a track she knew well to the cliffs. There in the dusk she managed to eat a sandwich, and there she stayed soothed till late at night. Then she went back to the town, and to the steamer, and astonished the steward at midnight by demanding the whole of the small ladies' cabin of four berths all to herself for the trip the next day. She got it because she paid for it. And there she stayed alone till the little steamer chugged into Helensville. She revived a little in the train, and looked at things out of the window as if she knew them for what they were.

She had not told her father she was coming. She had sent no word to anyone. She wanted to land in the city alone, to go to a hotel alone, to stay alone for a day or two, till the life and movement about her should help her to put out of mind the picture that haunted her, the picture of Dane in the garden alone. But even before she reached the first suburban station the sense of forward movement began to stir within her, a vague exciting sense of the adventure that might come with a to-morrow, and she saw that already she was beginning again.

## VII

Dane wrote the letter to Valerie the night he dined

with Dr. Alleyne. The two men had had a great talk, somewhat coloured by presentiment. They knew at least that they would never meet again, but neither guessed that the man who had just pronounced the sentence of death on the other would himself go first.

Dane walked afterwards to his hotel. He thought it strange he should be feeling so cynically indifferent to his limited future, and also that he should be feeling fairly well. He had these respites in which he recovered his nerve.

He had, after several conferences, finally told Davenport Carr that day the real reason why he wished Valerie to get away at once, to get off to Egypt, London, anywhere. As he walked to his hotel he saw his father-in-law as he had left him, standing speechless in the middle of his comfortable office. And for a minute he rather pitied Davenport Carr.

When he got into his room he knew he would never be in a better frame of mind to take the step he had rather dreaded for days, the irrevocable step of writing to Valerie. The talk with the doctor had keyed him up. So he sat down and began steadily enough. But he wobbled towards the end, his head dropped on his hands, and it took him over an hour to pen the last few lines. Then his head went down again, and stayed still for some time. Then he took up the letter and looked at it. He was not trying to read it through. He was hoping it would not hurt Valerie too much. Then an imp whispered in his ear, and he added the postscript. With a spurt of decision he sealed the envelope and stamped it, and took it out to the hotel letter box, afraid to leave it with himself till the morning.

He went to bed feeling it did not matter whether he slept or not. But the fates were kind that night. He slept

till well on in the next morning. But the force of what he had done came over him as he dressed. And he became a lost child, with no idea what to do with himself that week. With a small bag he wandered into the Auckland station and took the first train out, without knowing where it was going. He was exceedingly hurt by the surly manner of the guard who thought him drunk because he had not got a ticket, did not know where the train was going, and could not say where he wanted to get off. He paid his fine and the fare for the whole distance to Wellington, though he had no intention of going there. He found he was on a train that was carrying officers and men to the Trentham camp. For a while he was a little distracted by their talk of the war, their speculation as to what was going to happen to themselves.

"Dear me, we're all lost," he thought.

Later in the day he got off at Hamilton in the Waikato. He had never been in Hamilton, and had never wanted to be in it, though it was a pretty little town, but he could not sit in the train another moment. After some enquiries he found an elderly man with a motor car who was at liberty to drive him anywhere he chose to go. The elderly man thought it strange that he had to think for some time before he decided on his destination, and wondered if he were in the secret service. Finally Dane said Rotorua, and paid him in advance, or his driver would have hesitated at setting out with so desperate-eyed a customer.

It occurred to Dane the next night, as he bathed the dust of his long drive off his weary body, that he had come in the wrong direction, that he would have to pass through Auckland in order to get home, and he must not do that after Valerie had come there. He was now morbidly afraid of meeting her. He was trying to blot her out of his consciousness. What a fool he had been to

start south. He should have gone north. The next morning he took the train back to Auckland, and was almost afraid to walk out of it, lest she should be at the station. He hurried into the nearest hotel, and found that a boat was leaving that night for Whangarei. He had some food sent up to his room where he stayed till it was time to go aboard. He talked to the first officer at the wheel till two in the morning. At Whangarei he took the boat train to Kawakawa, not that he wanted to see Kawakawa again, nobody would, but he had this terrible craving to keep moving, to keep a constant succession of objects passing before his eyes so that he might not see Valerie's face. He was so afraid he would be drawn back to the mission station before she left, so afraid he would lose his nerve and go to beg her to stay.

At Kawakawa he hired a horse and buggy and started to drive towards Hokianga. But that night, in a little pub he met two men from the Far North on their way to enlist, and he and they drank themselves into forgetfulness of all the things that trouble man. In the morning they had gone on, and he was left to lie ill and wretched for three days, nursed by the fat wife of the pub owner, who bestowed the tenderness of a kind and sentimental heart upon this strange man who seemed to have lost his hold upon the earth.

Coming finally to his miserable self, Dane saw that it was more than a week since he had written to Valerie. He sent an enigmatical telegram to Doctor Steele, and the answer came back in one word "Gone."

Dane drove back to Kawakawa, took the train to Whangarei, was driven to Tangiteroria, and took the little black steamer down the Wairoa to Dargaville. It was nine o'clock in the evening when he arrived there. He went at once to his launch and turned her homewards.

His little bay was still and warm under the summer stars. His trees shadowed the rocks. He was conscious of the peace of it all. But as he stepped from the path through the trees into the open spaces of his garden his eyes lit on a bed of stocks, and the thing he dreaded, the remembrance that something was gone from this forever, struck him with the force of a blow. But he went on. His dogs bounded round the house barking joyously. A door opened and Lee looked out, and hurried in again to light lamps and to prepare something to eat.

Dane dropped into his hammock and lay still. He did not rouse himself till after eleven. Then his mind cleared for a little, and he told himself to go and face it. He knew perfectly well that she was gone. But he knew he would have no peace till he did the thing he shirked doing. He went into his study and looked at the piano. Yes, her music was gone. He went on to her front room. From the force of habit he almost knocked on the door. Inside he stood staggered a moment at the sight of her books, her furniture. Then a piteous smile twisted his face. Those things hurt too much. He staggered back into his library. He stumbled against one of his little red tables. Something snapped in his brain. He kicked at it, and it overturned, and the bronze things on it scattered on the floor with a harsh sound that clanged through the house. In a frenzy he seized the table by the legs and dashed it down again. Then he stumbled into his den and to the cabinet where he kept morphia.

The temptation came to end it all there and then, but he remembered even in that black moment that done that way it would reflect on Valerie, haunt her going away. He took merely enough to blot out the world for the night. Then he stumbled back to his hammock.

As he got into it the boys, who had been startled by



the crash, came cautiously into the study. San stopped to gather up the things that had scattered over the floor. Lee looked out at the hammock, and took up a possum rug and laid it over Dane's feet. Then he closed the door, and put out the lamps within.

And a late moon coming up at the end of the cutting cast a streak across the white and tired face of the man who had ceased to care for the present whether she ever rose again or not. ✓







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